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THE KEY OF PARADISE

BY

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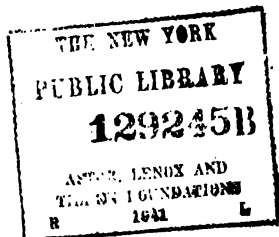
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To Florence

" Si dans notre vie, il n'y a eu jusques à present, ni chance, ni hasard heureux, nous avons du moins cette grande chose, une chose peut-être unique . . . cette société intellectuelle de toutes les heures, cette mise en commun de nos orgueils, enfin cette communion des cœurs, à laquelle nous sommes habitués comme à la respiration : un bonheur rare et précieux."

— E. DE GONCOURT.

PART I

THE KEY OF PARADISE

CHAPTER I

“He that would enter Paradise must have a good key.”

It was the last day of Valeria's childhood.

The evening before, her parents had informed her of her approaching marriage with Prince Decilis, and to-day at four o'clock the Prince would visit the convent and, in the presence of her nearest relatives and his, she would see for the first time the man fate destined her to marry. She had heard a little about him, his various titles, the amount of his income, some dates and facts from his family history; but she had never met the man himself, and at the thought of seeing him face to face in the convent parlour she was oppressed by new feelings—a self-conscious amused excitement, and a lurking restless anxiety. Other girls, her friends and play-mates, had been married before her, and more

than one had made no secret of her repulsion from the husband chosen for her, and yet had married him because a well-bred girl had no choice save to obey her parents. Even to her dearest friend she would not have said it, but to herself Valeria said, half smiling and yet half frightened at her own supreme audacity :

“ If he is impossible, I will not marry him. They should have let me see him first. This is my stepmother’s doing ; she has hurried the affair on to spite me, as if she had only just found out that I am fifteen, and that it is time to consider my future.”

During the recreation hour, when her dearest friends would fain have taken her aside and discussed the diamonds and silks and laces which were a necessary and delightful part of matrimony, she chose instead that they should play hide and seek with little girls of the junior class, on the plea that before long she would be debarred from playing any romping game at all. They laughed at her, but she got her own way, as indeed she generally did.

She was one of the first to hide, and she slipped away down a side alley of the garden,

shut in on one hand by a close-growing rank of tall cypresses, and on the other by the outer wall, a lofty massive piece of ancient lichen-stained masonry. Above it the sky of Rome stretched blue and cloudless, and in the sheltered garden the sunshine made hot summer of this November day.

The alley seemed deserted. It was not a favourite spot with the Sisters, perhaps because on the farther side of the wall lay the burial-ground of the neighbouring monastery. Near where it ended, the cypresses giving place to a tangled thicket of jessamine and syringa, Valeria started at sight of a crouching figure.

An old woman, on her knees, was wielding a pair of rusty garden shears and cutting the tall, ragged grasses that grew along the path's edge. To keep the sun off, she had spread over her head a large cabbage leaf, and worked busily, turning the shears this way and that with skinny, swift-moving fingers.

"It is old Giuditta," said Valeria, half aloud. Then raising her voice, "Good day, Giuditta."

The old woman raised her head, and the cabbage leaf falling from it, revealed a gaudy


handkerchief, some ends of grey hair, and a withered face seamed by innumerable lines. But the eyes which she fixed on Valeria were bright and piercing; so keen and fierce, indeed, that it was small wonder the younger pupils should secretly make horns at her with their little fingers, and whisper, half laughing, half terrified, that old Giuditta had the evil eye.

Valeria being no Roman, and half English, despised such foolish superstitions.

"Good day, signorina," said the old woman, her thin lips smiling, "if you are looking for a place to hide in, you cannot do better than behind that old one."

The old one, to whom she thus disrespectfully alluded, was the noseless bust of a Roman senator set up on a moss-grown pedestal, on the lowest edge of which Giuditta had placed her luncheon; black bread, two onions, and a handful of green figs.

Valeria considered the suggestion favourably. Since she was very small she had only to creep in behind the senator to be completely hidden. At present there was no need to hide at all, and she stood leaning against



the pedestal, looking down at Giuditta who was once more building up a little pile of fast-withering weeds and grasses. It seemed to the child astonishing, pitiable, and rather cruel that on this day which meant so much for her, anyone should work so patiently and uselessly.

"The sun is hot," she said, "sit down and rest for a bit, Giuditta *mia*." Without a word the old woman scrambled obediently into the shade, and began to eat her black bread and figs, reserving the onions lest their smell should offend the great lady's aristocratic sensibilities. For Valeria in her eyes was a great lady, though she looked so childish and wore the plain black dress of a convent schoolgirl.

"Fine weather for November," she remarked; "what is the day of the month, signorina?"

"The third of November, seventeen hundred and ninety-seven," answered Valeria, smiling, "but if the French come here they will change all that and the seasons will have new names."

"What an impiety!" Giuditta answered; "and how soon is the wedding to be, signorina?"

"Why, how do you know?"

"Ah, though I am only old Giuditta, I hear most things. May you be happy, signorina, and may you who are beautiful as an angel soon enter paradise!"

"Paradise?" echoed Valeria, surprised and startled. A small shiver passed over her, as she met the old woman's smiling gaze.

"Not the paradise of the holy Madonna and the saints, signorina — I speak of the paradise on earth into which all may enter provided they have the key."

"What do you mean? Tell me about it!" commanded Valeria.

Her curiosity was touched with awe. Certainly this strange old woman was mysterious and a little uncanny.

"Yes," Giuditta went on, "anyone can go there, even the very poor, the very humble; there is no Saint Peter at the gate to ask if one has the right to enter, and those who dwell in it walk the earth like other mortals, but their souls are in paradise. As for the way in, it sounds a simple matter. One has only to love with the great love and be loved with the great love in return; it is true that

for one who knows the great love there are thousands who know only the little one, and that is no use at all."

"And must it be a man whom one loves?" asked Valeria, simply.

"No, signorina, or few women would stop long in paradise. Any human being will do, and it is a child who brings the key to many of us."

"But supposing," said Valeria, "supposing one person loves and the other — does not?"

"Then, signorina, one stands at the gate of paradise and looks in but cannot enter, and it is better to miss the way altogether, or declare as many do that there is no such place."

This was a gloomy view, and instinctively Valeria wished to put it away from her. She spoke lightly:

"In the paradise that Don Ivaldi tells us about there is a serpent; is there one in yours?"

The old woman laughed harshly. "Per Bacco, yes, signorina, — a fine serpent with green eyes."

Valeria looked at her. She realised that the old face, battered, time-stained, sorrow-

worn, must long ago have been fine in outline, rich in colour, beautiful. She spoke quickly, yet her voice was soft and dreamy :

“And you, have you ever been there?”

Giuditta's eyes met hers with a fierce, sudden flash.

“Yes, yes, I have been in that paradise, and have been kicked out of it—as you may also be,” she added under her breath.

Valeria did not catch those last muttered words. She was listening to approaching sounds; far off across the garden voices and laughter, and near by the slow, shuffling foot-fall of sandalled feet.

With a swift, lithe movement she slipped behind the pedestal, the toga-draped shoulders, and broad head of the ancient senator. Close-growing branches stretched above them both, and their green twilight seemed almost darkness after the sunshine. Valeria felt a sense of relief.

She was unaccountably glad that one of the Sisters had chosen to pace that remote path. She could hear her wish Giuditta good day. She saw her squat figure, made broader by the long veil and formless skirt, pass slowly

on. Meanwhile the voices of her schoolfellows had died away.

Valeria sprang out from her hiding-place. "I have hidden myself too well," she said; "they will never find me here."

Old Giuditta looked up. "Listen a moment, signorina, before you go. People will tell you this thing and that thing about love. Some will say: He is a god, and some: He is a beast. Do not believe them. Love *is* what he is to *you*, — nothing else."

Valeria stood silent, large-eyed. Then she smiled.

"I will remember — and I will remember you when I take my leave of the convent."

She held out her hand and the old woman humbly kissed it.

A minute later Giuditta was alone again. She began to eat her onions; now and then she muttered to herself; perhaps she was thinking of her lost paradise.

The Prince had come, and the question whether he should be for Valeria the Prince of the fairy tale, or a very ordinary mortal, was one which would speedily be decided. In

deed it was a matter of minutes. One gilded, painted coach after another had lumbered up the steep, paved street to the convent gates. In the large, bare, dimly lit parlour there had gathered an assemblage of elegant and brilliant personages whose rich silks and satins rustled faintly as they moved, and who looked singularly out of keeping with straight-backed, wooden chairs, whitewashed walls, and sad-eyed, pictured saints. Here was the Conte di Massereno, Ambassador from his Majesty the King of Sardinia to his Holiness the Pope, and Valeria's father, and the Contessa his wife, Valeria's stepmother. Here were the Marchese and the Marchesa Crispolti, uncle and aunt to Prince Decilis, who, the latter being without parents, had fulfilled the parental duty of providing him with a wife. Here was the Abbate Conti, who had helped to negotiate the match, and here was the future bridegroom himself, Felice, Prince Decilis.


They had been received by the Mother Superior, herself a lady of high rank, and with her they conversed while waiting till the chief mistress of the pupils should enter, accompanied by Valeria.

Valeria was perhaps the first of the good nun's pupils who did not regret that the rule obliged her to appear before her future husband in her plain black conventual school-girl's dress, knowing that it positively showed to advantage that brilliant pink-and-white fairness she had inherited from an English mother.

This consolatory thought crossed her mind even as the door opened and she heard the murmur of voices within grow thinner and cease altogether. It can hardly be said that at first she saw Prince Decilis, so vague and confused was her first impression of him. Her whole soul was concentrated on the effort to be graceful and dignified in her demeanour, to give each curtsey the required depth, and not to seem "embarrassed by her person."

A moment came, however, when she said to herself, "I will look at him now," and she did so, not furtively but steadily.

The Prince had resumed his seat in one of the straight-backed, wooden chairs. Through the small, uncurtained window set in the wall above his head the strong, warm afternoon light slanted down upon him, making his face stand out distinct and clear cut as a cameo



against the deep shadows beyond it. Seen thus, it was what only a southern face can be, beautiful without being feminine. It was also colourless and singularly still in expression. With its sallow pallor and its immobility it might almost have been a mask moulded out of wax.

Valeria had but one thought about it; it was the most beautiful man's face she had ever seen. She waited for him to become conscious of her gaze and meet it, while her heart seemed to cease from beating.

Just then the Prince glanced instead at his coat-sleeve, and brushed something, a thread or a piece of dust, off the gold embroidery on the cuff. It was because the Abbate Conti spoke to him that in the next instant he looked across at her. She met his eyes and the Abbate's smile together, and that unhappy blush that belonged to her Anglo-Saxon blood must needs spread hotly from her chin to her forehead, making her lower her head in confusion like a shy child.

She recovered herself quickly, and later on answered some elegant commonplaces addressed her by the Prince with complete com-

posure and self-control. Before he left she had composed a little description of him for the benefit of her dear friends Donna Maria Patrizzi and Donna Violante Lambertini, which ran thus :

“Don Felice is twenty-five, but he looks older, I cannot quite tell why. His features are good, particularly in profile, but his nose is rather long. His skin is pale and sallow, not dark; his eyes are long shaped and very dark indeed. He has the grand air and also the serious Roman air, though, as you know, he is only partly a Roman. He wore a mulberry-coloured suit trimmed with narrow gold embroidery and diamond buttons, the new style of plain cravat, and his own hair powdered and loosely tied.”

She rightly thought that the reception of so many details would prevent them from asking questions which she felt she would rather die than answer.

That evening the sun set gloriously in a sky barred with scarlet and gold. Valeria looked out and saw its dying glory above the high brown roofs of the neighbouring monastery, and the cypress-crowned hills above them. The scarlet was turning to flaming rose colour, and the gold was stretching farther and farther, and she thought the clouds shaped

themselves into a fairy landscape where radiant turquoise lakes lay between shining hills and feathery forests, and said to herself smiling, "Perhaps it is the earthly paradise."

For the idea suggested by the old woman's words had taken strong hold upon her. She remembered certain past longings of hers, longings for the outside world, for the brilliant, changeful, restless life of the great city, for jewels from Picconi's, for Carnival afternoons spent driving in a gorgeous triumphal car, for nights spent at the play or the faro table — and despised them. All these things were within her grasp, and what were they? How could they be compared with the supreme thing which had come to her? The new feelings which possessed her, this delicious excitement, this intense happiness, this wordless poignant sadness, must surely mean love, the great love:

"Dalle piu alte stelle
Discende uno splendore,
Che desir tira a quelle,
E quel si chiama amore."

The sculptor poet's beautiful dream was born again in the vague, bright fancies of a

young girl's heart. Such as he had described the "great love" to be, such she pictured it — "a splendour descended from the highest stars," the key that would open paradise.

One regret troubled her. She wished that the Prince had been conscious of her glance — had felt her eyes resting on him and had raised his in answer, and that when he had talked to her his voice had changed, if ever so slightly. But she consoled herself by thinking that his whole air and manner were undoubtedly the "fine flower" of that good breeding and correctness, the instinct of which she herself, according to her stepmother, lacked deplorably.

The pale, impassive, beautiful face of the man whom fate had sent into her life rose before her, and she half closed her eyes so that she might realise it better. Yes, this was the man into whose hand she would willingly put hers, confident that, if an earthly paradise existed, he, and none other, could take her there.

Meanwhile the last day of her childhood faded, and already nothing was left of it save the glow as of a dying fire above the sharp-cut line of the hilltops, streaked with a few wisps of straggling, grey storm-cloud.

CHAPTER II

THE Corso was crowded, not with the gaudy party-coloured throng of Carnival time, but with the usual stream of carriages and loungers to be seen there on any fine winter's day. In this winter of "eighteen two," thanks to the goddess Peace, Italy had her English, like her poor, always with her.

Mr. Gilbert Charnley of His Majesty's — Regiment of Foot, failing to accommodate his long stride to the slow spasmodic Roman stroll, found that whether he walked or stood still he was equally in the way of a great many people, and took this circumstance as part of the afternoon's amusement. He had come to Rome for the first time in his life and had reached it early that morning. In those days every well-regulated tourist no sooner arrived in the Eternal City than he set out to visit St. Peter's. Mr. Charnley had

shown some slight originality by visiting the Campo Vaccino instead. On the other hand, he was by no means a superior person. He did not share the great Beckford's impatience of "parading the Corso with the puppets in blue and silver coats and green and gold coaches." The puppets amused him, and he found them more interesting than the shop windows, which he was able to pronounce very inferior to those in London, whereas he was obliged to acknowledge that for fine horses and gorgeous carriages the Romans were hard to beat.

"But their women," he thought, "can't hold a candle to ours." He made this reflection many times, as he grew tired of seeing again and again the same, regular statuesque profiles and sallow, dull complexions, while one after another the great ladies of Rome drove slowly by him. Among many handsome and some beautiful faces he had not seen one whose beauty lay in colouring and expression. Presently outside Mirri's print-shop the crowd brought him to a standstill, and after it had thinned again he remained standing near the edge of the high raised pavement, a

tall, conspicuous figure. A carriage came toward him, driven at a foot's pace, and looking at its occupants he felt his pulses quicken. Here, at last, in a young girl's face, was all that he had been vainly seeking. This face had beauty of outline but not the full, massive Roman beauty. The Roman dames were, for the most part, large and stately; this was a mere slight slip of a girl, but her skin was like white and pale pink rose-leaves, and her eyes had the clear, child-like brightness that only blue eyes possess. Many dark eyes had flashed quick glances at Mr. Charnley without rousing in him much responsive interest. Now a pair of blue eyes turned suddenly toward him, met his for an instant, "and the world was changed." I do not mean to say that he was aware of any such transformation; all he knew then was that the pleasant thrill of excitement which had already stirred him grew noticeably stronger.

By this time the carriage had passed. He waited a minute or so and followed it at a couple of yards' distance. But now he could only see the faces of the two gentlemen sit-

ting on the back seat, — one elderly, and the other, who faced the blue-eyed girl, young, dark, and boyish looking.

His absence of mind now rendered progress more difficult than ever, and presently he jostled someone who, instead of passing on, stood still in front of him and laughed.

He looked down, astonished to hear himself addressed by name. He saw a short, heavily built young man, and stared at him in puzzled amazement.

"Come, Charnley," said the other, "don't you know me?"

"No, I don't," answered Charnley; "yes, I do, by Gad! You are Victor Mount. Well, I *am* a fool!"

They shook hands heartily, both laughing.

"And now let me own," said Victor Mount, "that I did not know you for full five minutes. When I first caught sight of you stalking along, I thought, 'here comes a brother Briton, who should be ruddy and of a fair countenance, but has evidently had the plaguey fever,' and not till I came face to face with you did I guess all of a sudden that it was my old friend Gilbert, with whom I used to

rob cherry orchards. Gad! how time flies! It must be seven or eight years since we last met."

"It was just before I got my commission, and longer ago than that," Charnley said.

The two young men eyed one another, — the one reflecting that a fat, slovenly youth had grown into a wonderful dandy, and the other that a lean, lank boy had become a rather handsome and distinguished looking man.

"When last I heard of you," said Mount, "you were pounding the French at the siege of La Valetta. You can't have been here long, or we should have met sooner."

"I arrived this morning," answered Charnley.

He had remembered the girl with blue eyes, and was turning to glance after her vanishing carriage.

"Grey and rose-coloured liveries," he thought.

"I must make a note of that."

"Where are you stopping?" Mount asked.

"At Margariti's."

"The inns are wretched here; if you stay any length of time, you should take an apartment. I would ask you to come with me now to the Caffé Ruspoli, if it were not that

I have an appointment to help a lady choose engravings at Volpato's. But you must dine with me this evening, and we will chat over old times and friends."

Since Charnley could not do other than make his newly found friend's way his, they began to discuss them as they walked. The two men had not been school-fellows, one being an Eton and the other a Winchester man, but year after year, in the holidays, young Gilbert Charnley, of the Rectory, the rector's eldest, and young Victor Mount, the lord of the manor's youngest hopeful, were an inseparable pair of friends, united by a taste for fishing and for less irreproachable pursuits.

They separated outside Volpato's, having arranged to meet again at half-past five and dine at a *trattoria*.

Left to himself, Mr. Charnley faced round once more and walked up the Corso, choosing the other side of the street so as to meet the stream of returning carriages. His eyes were keen, and detected, a long way off, the grey and rose-coloured liveries they were watching for. Having his reasons for not wishing merely to meet the carriage to which those

colours belonged, he turned again and retraced his steps. The carriage overtook and passed him. This time the blue-eyed girl sat on the side farthest from him but, as she leant forward to address the elderly gentleman, he caught a glimpse of her lovely face, lit by an enchanting smile.

"She is more beautiful even than I believed," thought Charnley, triumphantly.

The carriage turned up the Via Condotti, skirted the Piazza di Spagna, and followed the Via del Babuino, Charnley keeping all the time at the same distance from it. There it stopped before a large open *porte cochère*, and Charnley, though apparently engaged in staring into a marble-cutter's window, saw the slim youth spring out and give his hand to the blue-eyed girl, whose small, slight figure presently vanished under the doorway. While the elderly gentleman walked off in an opposite direction, the slim youth followed her.

"I suppose they are husband and wife," thought Charnley; "what a pair of babies!"

Mr. Mount duly called for his friend at Margariti's Hotel, and took him to dine at a *trattoria* in the Via Papale.

At first their talk was of strictly personal matters, each wanting to know what the other had been doing during the ten years that had passed since they last met.

Charnley had got his commission at seventeen, had seen some service on the Mediterranean, and was now quartered in Malta. He had taken advantage of the present peace to get leave to visit Italy.

Victor Mount was a gentleman at large. An uncle's fortune prevented him from being in the position of most younger sons, and he was now, so he said, "forming himself" by foreign travel, preparatory to going home and entering political life. He meant to see all he could, since there was no knowing how soon those infernal French would once more upset the peace of Europe and make the Continent impossible for peaceful travellers. He had only been in Rome a few weeks, but had taken an excellent apartment in the Condotti, hoping to be able to find some friend who would share it, for it was much too large for his needs. The question was, Would Charnley be that friend? Each would be perfectly independent of the other, but they would share

the same cook and the same carriage — a carriage was a necessity.

Charnley thanked him, but explained that his plans were quite uncertain, and he might only remain a short time in Rome.

“Leave it open, then,” Mount answered, “but for your own sake get to know Rome before you leave her. I warn you her charms are most insidious.”

Here he paused for a moment to return the bow of a young man who had just come in and was passing close by the table at which the two friends sat. Charnley, glancing at the newcomer, saw a dark, boyish face, and recognised it. He waited till Mount, busy dissecting a *beccafico*, at last let the conversation drop, and then asked :

“Who was that young Italian whom you bowed to?”

“The Count Cesare Moroni, of the Counts of Moroni, is his right name and title, I believe. I met him at the Marchesa Sachetti’s. He has come here to eat a frugal dinner before starting on a round of *conversazioni*. The Italians do not dine much together, sociable as they are.”

"I saw him this afternoon in the Corso," Charnley said. "He was driving opposite a young lady with blue eyes, who could not certainly have been his compatriot, she was so unlike the other black-browed women."

"Do you mean a lovely little creature, graceful as a fairy, and almost as small, wearing a pale blue pelisse trimmed with sable?"

Charnley nodded.

"That is the Princess Decilis, universally called the Little Princess. You are quite right in supposing her not to be wholly Italian, she is so only on the father's side. Her mother was a Miss Pallaret, a daughter of Lord Wearmouth, whom the Conte di Massereno married when he was attached to the Sardinian Embassy in London. She died when her daughter was still a child, but not before she had, through the deaths of two brothers, inherited a large fortune. This passed to her daughter, and, as you may suppose, the latter did not want for suitors. I have all this from her grandmother, the Dowager Lady Wearmouth, who knows my family. She would fain have got hold of her granddaughter and married her to an Englishman.

Indeed, she wrote, urging that the girl, on leaving her convent, should be sent to her in England, but just then the French were threatening Rome, and the Count, who was Sardinian minister, wanted to be gone, and they made the troubled state of affairs an excuse for a hurried match between her and Prince Decilis. She was but fifteen at the time."

Mr. Charnley mused in silence. This girl, who did not look more than sixteen now, had been married over four years; but he had been quite wrong in taking the slim youth for her husband.

"There was another man in the carriage," he said, "rather an old fellow; he was the Prince, I suppose?"

"No, no," Mount answered, smiling. "The Prince is not an old fellow, nor would he be seen driving with his wife. The Italian does not drive with his wife, or visit with her, or take her to the opera; he leaves all that to the gentleman who serves her."

"More shame to him!" said Charnley, contemptuously.

"Ah, you misunderstand the position, my

dear fellow ! They say all foreigners do. In old days the Italian husband was as jealous and watchful as the grand Turk ; but French manners spread their mild and civilising influence till he began to feel himself ridiculous. Then he, not his wife, invented the *cicisbeo* or *cavaliere servente*. Since he might not be always at her elbow, he arranged that another should. If possible, he chose him himself among his poor relations, who had every motive for not offending him. His notions were quite contrary to the saying about safety in numbers. I believe the institution worked excellently, though censorious foreigners chose to be shocked at it. But then it did not suit the foreigners. When they tried to approach a fair one, the *cicisbeo* was always on guard. And you must always remember that he remained constant to his lady, ten, twenty, or any number of years, and she, since constancy was the fashion, must needs follow it. But now, in this subversive age, when every respectable institution is attacked, I am told that constancy, like hair-powder, is getting out of date. The French officers, when they were here, did their best to hurry its demise, and

would willingly have butchered all the poor *cavalieri serventi*."

"Is it easy for a foreigner to be received in Roman Society?" Charnley asked.

"Perfectly — provided a respectable person stands sponsor to him. Should you decide to stay here, as I hope you may, I promise that you shall know all the fair ladies in Rome, if it please you."

Night had fallen when the two young men stepped out into the street. Stars twinkled in the clear sky above the tall, narrow house-fronts, and, but for their light and the distant glimmer of a lamp before a Madonna's shrine, the street below was in complete darkness.

"Have they no lamps here?" Charnley asked.

"Not they; nothing a good Roman resents more than any attempt to do the sun's work for him. The French would have altered all that, no doubt, if they had stayed here longer."

"If they had not been kicked out, as, thank God, they were!" returned Charnley.

He looked up at the dark, far-off sky, then down at his companion. "I have decided to

accept your kind offer and share that apartment in the Strada Condotti."

Mount was jubilant. They would, he assured Charnley, make an excellent *ménage*.

"If I am an infernal chatterbox, you are an infernally good listener, and a philosopher to boot, for you can hear a man give the devil — I mean the French — their due, without turning black in the face. You used to be hot-headed enough, God knows; but I can see you have settled down into a steady-going, phlegmatic Briton, such as I admire with all my soul, but can never succeed in imitating."

Gilbert Charnley looked at the stars again, and laughed silently.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you know me better than I do myself, already."

CHAPTER III

THE little Princess looked about her and smiled.

She was seated at a faro table and for some time past had been losing steadily. Count Cesare Moroni, her next neighbour, had been equally unlucky, and his face wore an expression of dignified *ennui*. It was the seriousness of the faces round her that made the little Princess smile. "Just as if," she thought, "the winning or losing of a few hundred sequins were a matter of life or death!"

At this moment she became conscious that someone was looking at her; more than that, watching her intently. After waiting a little she raised her eyes from the card-table and saw two Englishmen standing behind the players on the opposite side of it. One was watching her still, with a glance not so much bold as singularly grave and steady. Valeria, meeting


it, felt a slight emotion made up of surprise and pleasure. She recognised him at once. This tall Englishman, who held himself with a soldierly erectness and an English stiffness, who would be handsome were not his chin too long and square and his under lip slightly prominent, had stood in the Corso a few days ago, and looked hard at her as she passed him. She had seen him again since then in the Villa Borghese. She reflected that he would no doubt be introduced to her, and the prospect in no way displeased her. Englishmen had been scarce in Rome during the last few winters, and being half English herself she felt a certain curiosity regarding them. This half-compatriot seemed to be bringing her luck, for in the last few minutes she had won again and again.

Thus she was annoyed when the other Englishman, touching his tall friend's arm, made him move farther along down the line of players; not, of course, because she wished him to look at her, but because she feared lest her good luck might vanish with his departure.

Charnley walked away, mentally consigning Mr. Mount to another region. "Let us go

over and watch the *trente et quarante*," said that gentleman, blandly. Charnley complied, and for some minutes contained his acute impatience. Then he said, "This is a damned dull game; I am going back to the faro."

They crossed the room and once more passed slowly along behind the long line of faro players. Thanks to his height he could see her now, at least when she bent forward. His head, in his absence of mind, came near to doing damage among the drops pendant from a great crystal chandelier, two of which lit the whole room with the clear radiance of their many wax candles. He stopped purposely a little below where she sat, so that his interest in her might be less likely to attract attention. He saw her very well, a slender, white-clad figure against a background of pale blue damask hangings. Her dress was of white silk edged with gold, a heavy clinging sheath of a dress belted high up with a narrow gold band. Her slender but perfectly shaped arms were bare to the shoulder. Round her throat she wore a single string of large pearls. Compared with the sallow or dark southern skins her brilliant fairness seemed something wonderful, and



more wonderful still her golden hair. She turned her head and spoke to Count Cesare Moroni, and Charnley, remembering the position which the young man held toward her, was stung by sudden anger. It was that fellow's privilege to render her a hundred small services; even now he was sorting her cards. Since he, Charnley, took himself off she must have been remarkably lucky. Before her on the table lay a pile of paper notes and gold sequins. As the game continued he became aware that others besides himself were watching her.

"Move up a little," said Victor Mount; "the little Princess plays high, and it seems she is *en veine*."

Charnley felt a certain disgust and repulsion. So she was a noted gambler, this woman who looked a child; and that was why heads were bent forward and eyes were turned to follow her play. He saw her stake heavily and lose. She smiled half contemptuously, looked at Count Cesare, and laughed outright in his disapproving face.

Charnley could have laughed, too, so great was his relief and satisfaction. The little

Princess's mirth was of so frank and spontaneous a nature, it satisfied him once for all that she was no gambler at heart. She won again and went on winning. Charnley could detect no sign of excitement in her. She arranged her stakes with perfect composure, and did not even seem aware of the attention fixed on her, only he fancied—he was not quite sure—that she knew he was there.

At a pause in the game one or two players left their places, making room for others. The little Princess rose, too. The people sitting near her protested against her going. Count Cesare gazed at her in astonishment and reproach, but she swept all her winnings off the table, gathering them up in the skirt of her white silk dress as a child gathers its treasures in its pinafore, and moved away, laughing.

“Come with me, and I will present you; now is your chance,” said Victor Mount, in his friend's ear.

“But you said you did not know her,” answered Charnley, reddening. Mount's words argued a perception on his part, of which he had never suspected him.

"Nor did I till yesterday," returned Mount, blandly; "now is our time before she goes into the other room."

The little Princess was busy transferring her gains from her lap into a small red morocco reticule, which Count Cesare held open during the process. Mount waited till it had shut on the last sequin, then, approaching, congratulated her on her good luck.

Valeria smiled. "I have been reproached," she said, "because I did not go on playing, but Tarabini, our good banker, looked so sad, I had not the heart to afflict him any longer."

"What consideration!" said Mount. "Have I your leave to present a friend of mine?"

"With pleasure," said the little Princess; and the words that brought Gilbert Charnley into her life were there and then quickly spoken.

"Let us go into the other room, gentlemen," she said. "We have no business here."

The adjoining reception room was vast, but fairly full of people, who stood in groups or paced slowly up and down. Charnley and the Princess remained in the shelter of a large tortoise-shell cabinet, while at a little distance

Mount questioned Count Cesare concerning the old card game of "Minchiate" which had been played by fashionable Rome long years before that young gentleman's birth. Charnley noted his friend's affable volubility and smiled. "Ah," he thought, "you don't get away from him in a hurry!"

He looked down at his companion. "Do you play faro every night?" he asked, and was astonished at the stupidity of the question.

"I think so, unless I dance; the theatre counts for so little here. I play *pour me désennuyer*. I used to play for the sake of the game, but I find I am growing not to care whether I win or lose. Still, one must do something."

Charnley looked about him at the many-coloured crowd; though men predominated in it, his eyes rested on many pairs, one woman talking to one man.

Valeria smiled as her eyes followed his.

"Perhaps I am tired of that, too," she said. "After all, Rome is a small place; you go from house to house and see always the same people."

"You had the French here for over a year," answered Charnley, bluntly ; "that was at least a variety, Princess."

"Yes, we had the French, and now we have the English. I hear you are an officer and have fought the republican gentlemen in Malta and Corsica."

"And shall fight them again, I hope, before I die."

"Take care, signore," replied the little Princess, smiling ; "you should not say such things here. The masters of this house are French in their sympathies, and people will tell you that I who speak to you am the same."

"Is it true ? " he asked.

"No," she answered ; "how could I be false to my own blood ? I am half English myself."

As she spoke her blue eyes opened wider and brightened ; she drew herself up a little. "And I am proud to be so."

Charnley sought vainly for suitable words in which to convey his poignant delight and admiration. She could not speak her mother-tongue, and he was forced to blunder in formal Italian. Rather than do that just now, he would keep silence.

"Do I look English?" she asked, raising her eyes to his.

"Yes and no, Princess. Your eyes are English and your hair and your wonderful fairness. Your grace is not English — it is your own."

"Ah, I had been told that my mother's fellow-countrymen could not turn fine phrases or make compliments."

"I can only speak for myself. I could not make one to save my life."

"So I perceive, signore."

Just then his keen eyes noted a curious change in her. She did not move a muscle, yet her whole face hardened, and her glance became fixed and watchful. Following it, he saw that it rested on two persons, a man and a woman, who were coming slowly forward through the wide doorway leading from the card-room.

The woman was tall, as tall as the man, and magnificently developed. The lines of her throat and arms were classic in their purity and fulness. Her face, on the other hand, was not classic; above all it had nothing of that frigid, sham classic beauty which

Pauline Borghese exemplified to perfection ; it would have looked startlingly out of place in a "Keepsake." And yet, with her straight brows, her full lips, her heavy round chin, her admirably poised head, and her curled masses of dead black hair, she was like some lady of Imperial Rome, whose bust Charnley had seen at the Capitol. Her skin had the tint of pale bronze, and her dress the colour of dull gold.

The thought crossed his mind, "If she looks at this woman in that way, it must be because of the man."

The man and his companion had this much in common, — both were handsome, and, in both, every look and movement suggested a passive insolence, a conscious claim to superiority. It irritated Charnley to be forced to acknowledge that on the man's part the claim was in a measure justified. He was not merely a handsome dandy. His pale, finely chiselled face stood out from the faces round it, stamped with a singular and striking, and, to Charnley, repellent individuality.

The little Princess was speaking.

"You will stay on here for the Carnival, Signore Charnley?"

"I believe so," he answered. "Who is that man, Princess, with the tall lady in yellow?"

Valeria smiled. "That man," she said, "is my husband."

It was past midnight. In the hushed streets nothing stirred but an occasional carriage rumbling homewards, its small lantern casting a wavering gleam over the uneven flagstones, its wheels creaking as they turned some abrupt corner. In the Palazzo Schetti the great reception rooms were already deserted, and the few privileged guests who lingered had gathered round the supper table.

Mr. Mount and his friend had received no invitation to supper, and the little Princess had refused one. The two Englishmen had been silent as they drove back to their lodging in the Via Condotti. Even Mount hardly opened his lips till he sat down before a table on which a cold meal was laid, and had refreshed himself with a bumper of Spanish wine.

As he looked up at Charnley, who was standing opposite him, absently grasping the back of a chair, his black eyes twinkled.

"Sit down," he said, "my dear fellow, and fall to. Begin at that flask as I did; but perhaps you are not thirsty. I find talking—at times—precious dry work. What a bear is the young Italian! And mine was a sulky bear into the bargain!"

"I was much obliged to you," Charnley answered; "but I thought you soon got rid of him."

"As soon as I could find a charitable lady to take him off my hands. After which my good friend the Cavaliere Gavotti poured gossip into my ears. Among other things I heard what Rome thinks of the Princess Decilis. I know what you are going to say—you don't care a damn what Rome thinks of her—still—"

Charnley gave a short laugh. "Still, you think I ought to know it, since you can give me the information. Well, I have no objection."

"To begin with, then, she is not popular."


"Of course not; she is too pretty for the other women."

"You are partly right. She is pretty, just that, and the Romans admire another style of thing altogether, beauty and plenty of it."

But one reason they give is that she is foreign, half Piedmontese and half English. They say she likes admiration, but wishes to be bound to no one, and tortures that wretched little Moroni by making him jealous every day — a coquette, in short. There's a list of crimes for you! Now the Frenchmen — ”

“Leave them out!” said Charnley, hotly interrupting him; “there is no more notorious liar about women on the face of the earth than a Frenchman; even a French gentleman; and not one in twenty of the French Republican officers can claim to be gentlemen, and you know it.”

“Wait a bit,” said Mount, placidly; “hear first what they said of her before abusing them. At any rate, I would back a Frenchman's knowledge of women against anyone's, even my own. They raved about the little Princess, but they said of her what the Prince de Ligne said of poor Marie Antoinette, ‘que sa jolie étourderie la tenait à cent lieues de la galanterie,’ and she was among the very few of the pretty women here with whose name no Frenchman's name was bracketed; the more to her credit, because her husband



was for the French and filled his house with them. By the way, did you see him?"

"Yes, I saw him. He was with a tall woman in yellow; who is she?"

"The Marchesa Elisei, whom he serves. It's an old affair, which began long before his marriage. I fancy he neglects his wife more than even the good folk here think suitable, and he gives out that he hates the English, which is scarcely civil to the Princess."

"Who tells me that she is proud of being English."

Mount laughed.

"I may be a fool, of course," Charnley answered, "but I believe what she said was true. I'll trouble you for some more of that pasty."


Here the conversation became intermittent and ended before long in an exchange of good nights.

Charnley did not feel sleepy. He opened the door leading from the sitting room into his bedroom and paced up and down. Outside the waning moon had risen, and her light, slanting in through the half-closed shutters, lay in faint streaks across the bare, tiled floors.

He went to a window, opened it, and pushing the shutters back leant out over the wrought-iron balustrade. Not very far off, among that wilderness of square chimneys and broad, flat roofs, was the roof which sheltered her. She had talked to him for half an hour, and had given him leave to call on her. Here was, at any rate, some payment for days of impatient waiting.

The moonlight was slowly creeping down into the court of the Palazzo Decilis, whitening the busts which stood on the parapet of the upper terrace and glittering on the topmost leaves of the orange and arbutus trees below them. It could not enter Valeria's bedroom because of close-shut venetians.

The little Princess, still wrapped in her furred cloak, leant back in an ample Louis Quinze arm-chair. She was alone, for she had sent her maid to bed. The light of the two candles burning on a table close beside her illumined faintly a small space in the lofty room, but could not struggle against the shadows which lurked in its far corners, and gathered between the curtains of the great gilded bedstead.



The little Princess felt painfully wide awake. She sat very still, but her mind was restlessly active. It took her back to her past, her youth, which seemed so far away and so ridiculously childish. It recalled old Giuditta and her legend of the great love and the earthly paradise, together with her own dreams—absurd and beautiful dreams—concerning them. A legend and a day-dream held all that she had ever known of the earthly paradise. Yet she had not ceased altogether to believe that it existed. Now and then she saw on some man or woman's face a look which convinced her that for some happy mortals it was possible to find it and dwell in it. She had cherished her dream long after all hope of its realisation had faded into nothingness. It had left a mark on her life which no reality, however bitter, could efface, and the man who had been its hero, the object of its brief idolatry—had he even so much as guessed at its existence?

Then she smiled bitterly. No, assuredly, he had never guessed.

That one bitterest humiliation had been

spared her. She remembered Felice as she had seen him that night beside the Marchesa Elisei, and laughed aloud. Those two at any rate, she with her evil temper written on her sullen brows, he with his look of weariness and satiety — those two did not live in paradise!

The little Princess forgot her past; her present rose up before her, and she saw it with that clear perception of all its ugliness and barrenness which comes during the long hours of a sleepless night or the first moments of an early waking. She resolutely assured herself that her lot was a common one. Every day men married because they wanted money or wanted an heir, or simply because custom required it of them; men bound more often than not by old ties which they did not break since custom did not require it. No sensible woman defied the great goddess custom. She herself had submitted to her, though with a heart full of rebellion and hatred. And custom was apparently justified. Those who married according to her decrees lived together more often than not on terms of affectionate unity or friendly indifference. She

and Felice had attained to neither of these; almost from the first a veiled hostility had existed between them, always present, though almost always veiled by a mask of politeness and consideration. Every day of her life Valeria wondered what might be the precise nature and intensity of the feelings which, in her husband's case, lurked behind that mask. She wondered again to-night. What emotion came first when he thought of her? Disappointment? He had a right to be disappointed. She had brought him a fine fortune, but she had borne him no child to inherit his name and her wealth. It was true that he professed complete indifference on this point, and that by his choice they now lived altogether apart. Resentment? In one respect she had indeed defied custom. She had refused her friendship to the woman who held the chief place in his life, she would meet the Elisei upon no other footing than that of distant ceremonious acquaintance.

Repulsion? Of one thing she was certain. The beauty, grace, and charm, which other men saw in her, he was wholly blind to; when other men thought her witty he thought

her frivolous ; when other men considered her fascinating, she seemed to him childish ; when in other men's eyes she was a beautiful woman, in his she was merely an insignificant doll. By nothing that she said, did, or looked, could she give him pride or pleasure.

The candles were burning low. Suddenly the silent house resounded to a dull rumbling as the Prince's coach drove under the vaulted *porte cochère* and drew up in the courtyard beyond. Then the heavy outer door shut with a bang, and the house fell asleep again.

The little Princess stood up, stretching her tired limbs and shivering. It was high time that she should sleep too.

CHAPTER IV

KING CARNIVAL was reigning. Thanks to many noble families having been half ruined by French exactions he brought less display than usual, though hardly less gaiety. No one guessed how soon the wings of an Imperial eagle would spread and overshadow even Rome. The wings of that eagle were not yet full grown.


A Spanish grandee, who had hired the first floor of a great historical *palazzo*, gave a masked ball there in the latter days of the Carnival.

The dresses were more magnificent than ingenious, and the sensation of the evening was made by six Roman gentlemen who appeared as French infantry soldiers. Prince Decilis was responsible for this brilliant idea, which enabled him to shock his acquaintances, ridicule his friends, and annoy his enemies, without offending his hosts. In those days Spain

being practically the ally of France, no Spanish grandee could find his jest other than excellent. He was corporal of the little company, and he and his men had rehearsed their parts till they were perfect in them, and could change at will their ordinary way of moving and holding themselves, and reproduce to a nicety the precise combination of soldierly swagger and free-and-easiness which characterised the soldier of the Republic when quartered in the Eternal City.

Don Felice, in his dark blue coat with red collars and cuffs which looked as if it had seen service, his white waistcoat, breeches and gaiters, was irreconisable. Even his dearest friends did not recognise him, except the Marchesa Elisei, and she was in the secret, since at her house the rehearsals had taken place. To-night she was in a bad temper because she had wished to appear as the *vivandière*, and not only had her husband demurred, but the Prince had maintained that the costume would not suit her. She was forced to content herself with personating Lucrezia Borgia.

She was sitting beside the Prince near a window of the long picture gallery. A dance



had just ended, and a gaudy masked throng streamed into the gallery from the ball-room and drifted up and down it. Her keen eyes detected the identity of first one masque and then another, and she had a kind word for each.

"Here is the Ottoboni as Diana, who in spite of her attributes wore less clothes than any of the other goddesses — hence the number of Dianas here to-night. Her partner should be Endymion, but is a fat Englishman dressed as a harlequin."

The Prince laughed. He had been consciously irritating her during the last half-hour by his serene good-humour.

"Why, he must be our worthy acquaintance Signore Victor Mount; he is very droll. These Englishmen, when they play the fool, do it *con amore*. Have you seen his tall friend yet?"

"If you want to see him, you had best look for Metastasio's Semira."

"Who is she, pray? I never even heard of the lady."

"Do not be absurd! You must know the opera *Artaserse*. Ah, here they come."

A couple were walking slowly down the gallery. Presently they would pass within two yards of Decilis and the Marchesa.

The man was very tall, and wore a black velvet dress copied from an early portrait of Vandyck; the full, short waistcoat was of white satin, and there were knots of black and white ribbon on his shoes and the handle of his black sheathed sword. It was a sombre dress, but it showed Gilbert Charnley's fine figure to excellent advantage. The woman beside him was half shrouded in a long, Eastern veil of pale-coloured, silver-starred gauze. It almost reached her feet, and met her narrow black mask. She was talking and laughing eagerly and gaily, while Charnley bent his tall head to listen. Then he laughed, too, and his hearty, boyish mirth rang out above the buzz of voices.

The Prince was whistling softly under his breath—of all tunes in the world—the “Ça ira!”

“Stop that noise,” said the Elisei, frowning; “it exasperates me.”

The Prince smiled and leant back in his chair.

"Dear friend," he said, "you remarked just now that if I wished to see the tall Englishman, I had best look for Metastasio's Semira. And now we have seen them both. But why did you say that?"

The Marchesa was literal-minded and took his simplicity quite seriously.

"Oh, these husbands!" she answered; "when all Rome is laughing at them, they ask one questions such as that."

"But, dear friend, Rome laughs for so little, and even one's friends, from mere excess of sympathy, exaggerate one's misfortunes. Tell me, does all Rome pretend to believe that my wife is in love with that English beef-eater?"

"Everyone knows that your wife has not heart enough to fall in love at all, but everyone sees that she does her best to insult you. You detest the English — this Englishman is constantly at your house."

"And do you suppose this Charnley has a heart, as you express it? Can an Englishman have a heart?"

"Do you remember Beresford and Nita Salimei?"

"Let me see, do I remember? Yes, Signore

Beresford ran away with the Contessa Salimei, shot her husband and then married her. What a barbarous proceeding! I shall have to be careful."

The Marchesa eyed him contemptuously. "Yes, you had better be careful," she said; "he is so big he might kill and eat you. And what should I do?"

A little later the French corporal saw one of his men standing solitary in a doorway and, going up behind him, slapped him on the shoulder.


"What are you doing," he asked, "planted here like a weeping willow? *Corbleu!* Here's a fine son of Gaul! Are there no pretty women?"

The young man's answer was a sweeping moral condemnation of all pretty women, without exception.

"Yes, yes," said Don Felice, smiling; "that is a truth we all perceive — at intervals. But why trouble yourself with it just now, my Cesare?"

"Hush!" said Don Cesare, leaning toward him.

Valeria and Charnley, on their way back to



the ball-room, were passing so close to the two men as almost to brush against them. With a slight disdainful movement the little Princess drew her long veil closer about her, lest its floating folds should brush their uniforms. Her companion looked over their heads.

"Accursed beast of an Englishman," muttered Count Cesare, as his burning eyes followed them.

"You must own that to-night, at any rate, he is a handsome fellow."

"Do not mock me," said the young man, huskily; "I cannot endure it. Come with me, Felice."

He thrust his arm into that of the Prince and drew him through room after room till they found an empty one.

There he flung himself into a chair and took off his mask.

"At last one can breathe!" he said. His dark, boyish face was drawn and haggard. "My life is insupportable," he broke out. "I cannot bear it."

A smile hovered round Don Felice's finely cut lips and vanished. He sat down beside his cousin. "What does this mean?" he asked.

"You know very well," answered Don Cesare, sullenly. "She has hardly spoken to me to-night. I suffer tortures, and she does not care that!" He snapped his fingers.

"Well, then, challenge him and kill him," said the Prince, speaking in a cold, gentle voice.

"It is impossible! If I did that, she would never speak to me again."

"Has she told you so?" asked Decilis, his tone changing slightly.

"Yes, she has told me so."

"And you believe her?"

"Ah, she is not like other women! What she says she will do, she does! you can no more move her than you can this marble." He struck with his fist an inlaid table near him.

"That depends on how hard you strike," Decilis answered.

But Count Cesare was not listening to him.

"The fellow is not even noble," he said bitterly. "His friend has a valet, a Neapolitan, who is a friend of Emilio's, and he understands English better than they think, and he has heard Charnley himself own that his grand-

father was a roturier. She would not speak to me because I had on this dress. You saw for yourself how she drew her veil away for fear it might touch me. But if it had not been that, it would have been something else."

Decilis shrugged his shoulders.

"My friend, I do not know what consolation to offer you. Time is on your side. In a few weeks Charnley will have gone, and, if you cannot fight him and kill him, a French bullet will doubtless do the business for you. And now I must be going."


Had Gilbert Charnley been aware of young Moroni's state of mind he would have felt the heartiest contempt, whereas the conversation between the two cousins would have seriously shocked what Mount called his "fundamental British respectability." He had himself known moments of depression, but they had never been caused by Donna Valeria's refusing to speak to him. On the contrary she had always shown him the same charming and elusive friendliness. To-night she had done more; among a crowd of men she had signalled him out for preference, had slipped up to him, as he stood a trifle

bewildered in the masked throng, and had addressed him in a clear, high childish voice and in preposterous English. He was superlatively, feverishly happy. For him the real world, prosaic and limited, had ceased to be, had changed into this gay phantasmagoria peopled with fantastic masques, and alive with light laughter and music, and yet dim and unsubstantial, holding but two real, living human beings, himself and the girl whose lips laughed below her mask as she bade him call her "Semira." She smiled again as she repeated to him a verse of a song, her song, she told him, in the old-fashioned opera to which she owed her existence :

"Sarò felice
Se il caro Bene,
Sospira e dice:
Troppo a Semira
Fu ingrato Amor."

He learnt to say it after her and remembered it long afterwards.

The night was far advanced. The other dancers, unconscious of any want of substantiality, were growing hungry. Even Semira asked for an ice.



He was pushing his way alone across the densely crowded refreshment room, when he came face to face with a broad-shouldered harlequin who laid hands on him with a delighted exclamation.

"Gad! I have been on the lookout for you this hour, Gilbert, but I might as well look for a needle — did you ever see anything like these Italians? One would suppose they had not fed for a month."

"If that's all you have to say to me, it can keep; I am getting an ice for the Princess."

"This way, then," said Mount, grasping him by the arm. "I have something important to tell you. I leave Rome to-morrow."

"Leave Rome to-morrow!" exclaimed Charnley, in blank astonishment; "and what the devil for?"

"I have met Leveson, who is Secretary at Florence, and he tells me that Sir Andrew March and his family have just arrived there."

"And what's that to you?"

"This, sir, that Miss Constantia March is the most elegant, most lovely, most accomplished of women, and that when we parted at Vienna I promised her that, should she and

her family visit Italy, I would join them in whatever place they might be. The father is an old valetudinarian and the brother a young cub. This departure of mine need not upset you; I shall come back here, bringing my friends with me. Charnley, my boy, you always intended to visit Florence; you had far better start with me."

Charnley had secured an ice and, holding it high above the heads of the crowd, was slowly retracing his steps.

"What?" he said with a laugh; "leave Rome in the thick of the Carnival? There is no young lady paragon of perfection waiting for me in Florence."

"Whereas in Rome — ? Upon my word, I don't like leaving you here; you are less phlegmatic than I thought and less to be trusted. Think it over; you need not decide till to-morrow morning."

But Charnley was already out of earshot.

The little Princess had become impatient. She sat on the wide, cushioned window-seat of a lofty, seventeenth-century window, her small feet, in embroidered red morocco slippers, dangling like a child's. Many people passed

her on their way to and from the supper room, but few noticed the solitary veiled figure, and none recognised in it Donna Valeria Decilis till the moment came when a man dressed as a French infantry soldier caught sight of it and stood still. The little Princess was turning so that she might look out over the wide courtyard to the opposite wing of the *palazzo* and its brilliantly lit windows. Heavy boots creaking, a heavy sabre clanking over the marble floor, made her start perceptibly. At sight of a blue and white uniform she became angry.

“Here is Cesare,” she thought, “come to bore me.”

A second glance told her that the man who was approaching her was of larger, stronger build than Count Cesare, but told her nothing more. All the six men who masqueraded in French uniforms looked necessarily much alike, the more so that each wore a thick black mustache, which disguised the uncovered part of his face. Her husband was said to be among them, but she could be certain that he, at any rate, would not turn aside to seek her out. She had refused dances to most of them ;

this must be a tactless person who meant to reproach her on that account. Never mind, Charnley would come back soon, and then she would get rid of him.

The sham Frenchman paused in his swaggering stride, brought his heels together, and saluted.

"*Tiens*, madame," he said; "has the English goddam deserted you?"

He had a rough voice and a hideous French accent. His words, and still more the tone in which they were spoken, amazed Valeria, though the licence of a masquerade partly excused them.

"Monsieur," she said disdainfully, "I have not the honour of your acquaintance."

"Are you so sure of that, madame?"

"I am sure that I neither know you nor wish to know you."

The man sat down on the window-seat beside her and began to twist his long mustaches with a conquering air.

"And yet," he said, "madame has no prejudice against foreigners."

"Not against foreign *gentlemen*."

The little Princess was growing angry, and

like most women she could not be angry without trembling. The bracelets on her bare arms clinked faintly. She could see that the man beside her was smiling.

"Rome," he said, "is an unhealthy place for Englishmen. They are so much afraid of malaria that they wear quills filled with quicksilver and sniff vinegar all day, and yet it does not help them much. And they catch other fevers, from which quicksilver and vinegar are no protection."

"Oh, why does not Charnley come back?" thought the little Princess. "If only he would come back — and kill him!"

Through her helpless anger crept a vein of fear.

"If you told him," pursued her companion, "how unhealthy Rome is for him, perhaps he would leave it — of his own free will. The English are a prudent race."

"You can tell him yourself," answered Valeria. "He will be here presently. You can tell him all that you have told me — if you are not too prudent."

Charnley made his appearance in the doorway leading from the supper room. The figure

seated beside Valeria had just caught his eye. He took the French soldier to be Don Cesare, a person who was often in his way, but toward whom he felt a certain contemptuous tolerance, based on the certainty of his complete insignificance in the eyes of the little Princess. But to-night he hated him, as he was ready to hate any man who could make the least claim on Valeria and seize one minute of the time that might have been his.

Valeria's companion stood up and made the Englishman a nonchalant bow.

"Bon soir, mon lieutenant, how goes it?"

Charnley stared at him astonished. This person of free and easy manners who addressed him in French was certainly not Don Cesare — or Don Cesare had a genius for acting. He nodded stiffly and said:

"Good evening, sir," in English.

"I fancy you don't know me?"

"It's hardly likely I should," returned Charnley, now speaking in Italian; "I have no friends —"

Before he could finish his sentence Valeria interrupted him.

"Signore Charnley," she said, "I see you do

not recognise my husband. Considering the disguise he has chosen, that does not surprise me."

The French corporal muttered an exclamation. Then, with a quick movement, he raised his mask and removed it.

The other two gazed silently at the face he had uncovered. The heavy, waxed mustaches, the black hair falling over the forehead, the brown paint, the half-insolent smile, still made it curiously unfamiliar.

"I knew it!" said the little Princess to herself, but in reality she had not known it and had merely obeyed a swift terrified suspicion. "How handsome he is!" she thought.

"As the Princess says, it is not surprising," remarked Don Felice; "you, yourself," he continued, turning to Valeria, "only recognised me, if indeed you did so, during the last two minutes." "You are quite right," answered the little Princess, "and I congratulate you upon an excellent piece of acting. I almost believed that I was in the company of a Frenchman of the lowest class."

The Prince frowned slightly. "Are they of the lowest class, those brave soldiers who con-

quer all Europe?" Then, turning from her as if he recollected himself, he addressed Charnley. "You were saying when Mme. la Princesse interrupted you that you had no friends—you did not mean, I hope, that you have no friends in Rome?"

"I was going to say that I had no friends in the French Republican army."

"That is obvious," returned Don Felice, coolly. "You English are a serious people; you cannot accept a jest as a jest. Not but what most Romans are quite as serious. I wonder how many people will think it needful to inform his Holiness of my jest to-morrow. And now I will go and slake my thirst. *Bon soir*, Charnley, *bon soir*, madame."

Left alone together, Charnley and the little Princess kept silence. The latter was trembling from head to foot. Her anger and fear were alike swept away by a veritable storm of emotion. The old cry rose in her heart, the old cry, daily stifled, derided, but never wholly silenced: "I love him! How I love him!"

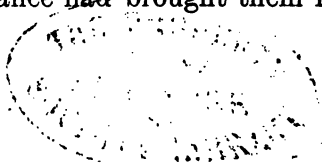
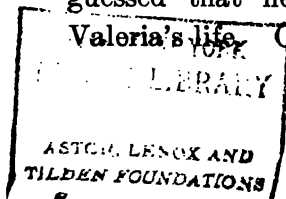
His whole manner had been a scarcely veiled accusation, his words a scarcely veiled

threat. For years he had let her go her own way and choose her own friends, and she had accepted his confidence in her as the measure of his indifference. To-night it was as though he had changed his nature as he had changed dress and look and voice. But Valeria forgot all this. Hot tears were gathering in her eyes and trickling down under her mask. She could taste them salt upon her lips.

Nevertheless, her voice, when she spoke, was almost steady :

“Why were you away so long?”

Charnley noted the faint tremor, and it was very sweet to him. He fancied that she had intervened between him and the Prince because, giving way, womanlike, to a nervous fancy, she had feared for his sake. Then his smouldering wrath flared up again. Was she right after all? Had the Prince really conceived some purpose of insulting him which she had frustrated? From the first he had hated Decilis, yet till within the last few minutes he had only realised his existence, not his individuality. He saw him so seldom, knew or guessed that he held so small a place in Valeria's life. Chance had brought them face



to face for the first time, and the hatred had become a very strong and personal one. Instinct told him that here was his real enemy, and here was a man worth hating.

"It was by no fault of mine," he said. "There was a crowd, and Mount delayed me. He wanted to tell me that he is leaving Rome to-morrow."

"Leaving Rome — to-morrow?" echoed the little Princess.

"Yes, he is off to Florence, and he is anxious that I should go with him."

"Will you go?"

"Not unless you tell me to."

Valeria was repeating to herself Don Felice's words, "If you were to tell him how unhealthy Rome is for him, perhaps he would leave it — of his own free will." What were they really, a threat or a jest?

"If I were to say 'Go!' would you obey me, Charnley?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered doggedly; "I should go and never come back."

"If I do it," thought Valeria, "if I commit such a folly, Felice will think that I have warned him, and that he is a coward, and that

I am a coward too. How he would laugh at us!" Even as these thoughts passed across her brain she said the words she had always meant to say:

"Stay, my friend."

CHAPTER V

IN announcing his departure for the next day Victor Mount had miscalculated possibilities, and he was forced after all to spend that day in Rome and the night following it. During the day his private affairs — arrangements with the *vetturino*, a bargain with an indigent noble over a small picture he meant to take with him as a present to Sir Andrew March — absorbed his whole attention. The opera and an impromptu supper given him by some friends took up most of the night, which for him, at least, ended early.

At six o'clock he and Charnley were breakfasting.

The shutters had been thrown back, but not a ray of daylight crept in through the uncurtained windows. In the next room Ercole, Mount's Italian valet, moved about softly on slippers feet and, having finished his preparations, slid close up to the door dividing the

bedroom from the *salone*. It did not shut very closely, and he applied his ear to the crack.

Mount had just ceased thinking about his breakfast and begun to think about his friend, whose face looked haggard in the pale candle-light.

"So you won't come with me?" he said. "Why not? You have still time to change your mind."

Charnley spoke with deliberation. "Nothing would make me leave Rome except an order from my commanding officer—and not even that, perhaps."

Mount's small black eyes opened wider as he stared with a profound seriousness of expression at Charnley's face, which had paled slightly.

"Do you mean to tell me that under any circumstances you would throw up your career?"

"You mean my career in our service? The chances are the Government won't let us keep Malta, which will mean clearing out of the Mediterranean. But that difficulty can be got over. I can always enter the Neapolitan

service; they are glad enough to get an Englishman."


"You would throw away your whole future, and for what? Do you suppose she would make the least smallest sacrifice of tranquillity, position, or reputation on your account?"

"I have no reason to suppose that she would make any."

"Ah, my dear fellow, so you say. And yet in your heart you think that she will run away with you as the Contessa Salimei did with George Beresford. You have owned yourself capable of any folly."

He recalled suddenly how once when they were boys bathing together, he had got cramp and would have drowned but for Gilbert. He could see the alder-fringed river with its calm, swiftly running water glittering in the sunlight. He could almost feel again his own sensations when the cramp seized him and fear parched his mouth. It seemed to him that now Charnley was as a man drowning, while he stood by and did nothing.

"I wish to God," he said, "I had never persuaded you to stay on here! I did you a damned ill turn."



"You did not persuade me," Charnley answered. "You have no responsibility in the matter; I had decided it a good five minutes before I clapped eyes on you." He leaned forward with his elbows on the table and lowered his voice. "If I knew," he said, "if I knew for certain that this affair would turn out badly, that it would be my ruin, in short, do you suppose I would turn back now? If you could prove to me that every hope I have is vain and every fear you suggest justified, you would only waste your breath."

"Then I'll keep it, my dear fellow, I'll keep it. After all, I believe that a man in love is like a somnambulist, and, even if he be walking on the edge of a precipice, it is dangerous to wake him."


"A first-rate notion," said Charnley, with a forced laugh; "the fact is that going to bed late and getting up early has given you the blue devils, and you'll be seeing precipices in the Campagna. It's time we should be moving."

The windows had become oblongs of pale grey, and the candle-flames were turning a dull orange. In the next room Ercole retreated

on tiptoe from what was becoming a dangerous position. He kept repeating to himself sentences that he had overheard and, if they were fragmentary, adding a word or two which seemed appropriate. He regretted that their excellencies had spoken so low at times. Still the phrase, "You think she would run away with you as the Contessa Salimei did with George Beresford," would in itself be worth a good deal to him.

Ercole had been engaged as a stop-gap because Barton, Mount's English valet, had fallen ill of Roman fever. Of late, since the latter's recovery, he had been forced to resign all hope of profitable eavesdropping. A petty war had raged between the two men-servants, and even now the Neapolitan's plump face kept breaking into smiles at the thought that he remained master of the field. For he was to stay on as Charnley's valet.

Already he had escaped from Barton's watchful eye, that eye being fixed on the man who was nailing his master's trunks into their stout oak travelling "cradles." In a few minutes he would be able to slip out and visit a friend of his.




With much cracking of whips and jingling of harness, Mount's English post-chaise, drawn by four horses, clattered down the street, which was empty, as yet, except for a few stray cats. Its arrival brought the neighbours to their doors, and a small crowd collected and looked on with amusement while Barton, wrapped in a huge greatcoat, hurled English oaths and scraps of mysterious Italian at the men who were fastening the trunks into their places.

It was broad daylight by the time the chaise started, the grey, silvery daylight of an overcast "*scirocco*" morning. A groom rode behind, leading a horse belonging to Charnley, who intended to drive with his friend as far as Boccano, and ride back. They drove through the Piazza del Popolo and out along the Flaminian way, and very soon were between trees and hedgerows. Those hedges beginning to grow red with buds made them think of spring in England, and their talk turned on old times and the old home. Even the endless grey-green undulations of the Campagna did not turn the current of their thoughts. If its gaunt ruins seemed like

ghosts from an alien world, its stunted wind-shorn copses looked English enough. Yet even the muddy pavement trodden by their horses' hoofs spoke of past glory and present desolation.

When Charnley rode back toward the city, the dwindling mists of morning were unveiling fold upon fold of barren grass-land, dull green under a dull grey sky. The oppression and uneasiness of the *scirocco*, whose gusts met him, irritated Charnley's nerves and relaxed his muscles. He had parted with keen regret from Victor Mount, that cheery companion and old friend, and he felt as if, in so doing, he was breaking every tie which bound him to his own past, his own country, his own duty. He cursed himself for having conceived so absurd a notion, yet the feeling refused to be shaken off. Under its austere influence pleasant fancies became delusions, to be despised and sneered at. He reviewed the last few weeks of his life, and acknowledged that, while slipping past like hours, they had changed him as if they had been years. He judged the society which had received him with such pleasant curtesy, which had




treated an unknown foreigner as a familiar friend, which had given him his heart's desire, in so far as it had made it easy for him to spend hour after hour in the presence of the woman he loved—and he condemned it fiercely as frivolous, lax, and heartless, only one degree less openly corrupt than that Neapolitan society which was the byword of Europe. Was it possible, he asked himself, that, brought up in such a world—swayed by the force of custom which makes vice almost virtue, and virtue almost vice—was it possible that any woman could escape contamination? The clear, childlike eyes of the little Princess seemed to look into his, and he was ready to stake his life upon the chance that the one woman who mattered might touch pitch, and yet be undefiled.

Nevertheless, she knew that he loved her; she could not be blind to that patent, unconcealable fact. How was it that, through all these weeks, the words which rose so often to his lips had never passed them? Because she had not chosen to hear them, and because he moved and lived under her influence, and was her thing, her servant.

More completely than the most contemptible Italian he had become a *cavaliere servente*. He who had once taken for his motto those words of a great soldier, "Better be a savage of some use than a gentle, amorous puppy, obnoxious to all the world," now spent his mornings dawdling in his lady's rooms, his evenings in her box at the opera. And she, the woman for whose sake he had been false to his old ideal, what was she? Half angel, half child? Or what the Romans called her, a coquette, ready to play with edged tools, sure of herself, conscious of being wound-proof, and practised at the game; a creature heartless, and therefore vile? Looking that possibility in the face, he hated the little Princess as passionately as he had ever loved her—for full five minutes. Those minutes over, his emotion ebbed rapidly, and a curious reaction followed.

He checked his horse and looked before him. Along the horizon stretched the domes and roofs of the city, half hidden to the right by a dark band of tree-tops. The sky was clearing; there would be a fine day yet for the merry-makers in the Corso, for Valeria in



her flower-decked carriage, above the laughing, seething crowd. She would laugh, too, amid the flying *confetti*, like a child who knows nothing and regrets nothing, and to the crowd she would seem a radiant being, far removed from the ugly cares and sordid sorrows of common, struggling human life. Yet she was in reality a wronged and unhappy woman. He never forgot her wrongs and sorrows, because in his own eyes they were his full and sufficient justification. She was no better than a helpless prisoner in the hands of a man who insulted and despised her, and sometimes he had even fancied himself her chivalrous knight, who might honourably slay her gaoler and free her from durance vile.

Just now he saw himself in a very different light, and from his contempt for his own self-flattering delusion grew a doubt which tortured him as no other doubt could do. Did Valeria hate her gaoler? She might make half-jesting, half-bitter allusions to marriage, even to her own marriage in particular, but he had noticed that she, whose frankness was almost childlike, avoided even the mention of

her husband's name. He recalled the mocking face of Prince Decilis, smiling at him through its disguise. Surely he had read a challenge in those insolent eyes?

He turned in the saddle and looked back. There, between the hedgerows, stretching away like a pale ribbon into the wide Campagna, lay the road that led to Florence and freedom. He had made his choice long ago, and yet he knew that only the last few minutes had rendered that choice irrevocable.

CHAPTER VI

"Senza moccolo ! Senza moccolo !"


For the last time the race-horses had thundered down the Corso between two banks of close-packed, shouting human beings. The last cannon had been fired. The carriages, with their freight of fantastic figures, after driving round the Piazza del Popolo, had returned again to form a line which stretched to the Piazza Colonna. Day was waning from the clear sky overhead, the colours were fading out of flag and streamer, and in the narrow street below, the many-hued throng was fast becoming a dark, indistinct mass.

One after another small stars of yellow light twinkled from balcony after balcony and shone out among the crowd, then two great flames seemed to sweep along parallel lines, rising and falling, as innumerable wax tapers wavered in the hands which held them, and with the flame rose a roar of voices, *"Senza moccolo !"*

Thus began the game of the *moccoletti*, and all the street played it. On the balconies, in the carriages, on the pavement, in the roadway, close against the wheels and almost under the horses' hoofs; the fine lady and the washerwoman, the plain citizen, the prince, the peasant, each spending his whole energies in trying to keep alight the little candle he carried, and by shoving, reaching, craning, and every device that ingenuity suggested, to put out every other taper, pronouncing over each little flame that flickered out the mocking elegy, "*Senza moccolo!*" The mirth of the populace, checked for a few minutes, burst out afresh, the wilder for the gathering darkness and the sense of an end approaching.

Charnley, bending from a balcony, lowered an extinguisher fastened to a string, and dropped it over first one candle and then another, while the little Princess laughed till tears gathered in her eyes. He had only one hand to work with, since in the other he held his own *moccolo*. The crowd below applauded his skill and dexterity, and Valeria screamed encouragement in his ear.

She wore a scarlet dress; jewels glittered



round her white throat, her hair shone like spun gold. She was a fairy straight from elf-land; and as for Gilbert Charnley, the schoolboy who lurks in every healthy man had awoke in him, and he was fifteen again.

They were attracting much attention. Nearly every face in the packed space below was turned toward them, while, as if at a signal, the clamour of voices and laughter lulled perceptibly. Charnley and the little Princess looked up and down the long balcony, crowded with fantastic masqueraders, never guessing that, high above their heads, a single white figure, astride upon a window-sill, held the attention of the gaping throng.

Now the white figure was clinging to the edge of the window-sill, now it was swinging from a rope. The rope wavered and the figure swayed with it, then, while the crowd held its breath, slid down, dropped on the balcony, staggered slightly, and recovered its balance. Laughing, shouting, clapping, the street sent up its deafening applause.

Charnley and Valeria had turned, bewildered, to see beside them a white, mocking, painted face. In an instant Valeria's taper


went out in her hand, and Charnley's was jerked from his grasp, and even as they realised their discomfiture, the white mask slipped away. Charnley sprang after it, but the crowd on the balcony, which gave way to let the invader pass, closed in upon him — a crowd of fair women, laughing wildly, clinging to each other, pushing this way and that. He could but laugh, too, and retreat, though the blood sang angrily in his ears as he heard the roar which welcomed the victor.

"It was a trick, a plot," he said hotly ;
"these people connived at it."

"A very clever trick," answered Valeria.

She was trembling from head to foot. She knew what the crowd on the balcony knew, and only Charnley was ignorant of, that the man whose shining, mocking eyes had for a moment stared into hers was her husband, Felice, Prince Decilis.

All her gaiety had died out like the flame of the little taper, while Charnley had regained the dignity of manhood, and with it a bitter impatience against the senseless mirth and noise that kept him silent, while the precious minutes slipped by. He grew intolerably



anxious for the sound which at last reached him, the clear, far-off notes of a bell — the bell of San Giovanni in Laterano, ringing first by ancient right. Then the bells of the three other great basilicas burst forth in a melodious chorus which, caught up by further bell-towers, widened and deepened through the whole city, and with the Ave Maria rang the death-sentence of poor King Carnival. He might, indeed, drag out a dwindling existence till near midnight; his glory had departed.

Very slowly the vast throng melted, sending streams of tired revellers down every side street and byway, and night triumphed over the little twinkling lights which had held her so long in check.

Charnley and the woman he loved stood alone together in the shadow at the end of the balcony. "At last!" he said; "do you know that for three whole days I have never had a chance of speaking to you?"

Valeria glanced up at him. She was thinking that twice within a week she had seen him made to look ridiculous. At the ball, when he had stood holding a plateful of ice-cream and staring at Prince Decilis, and again

half an hour ago, when he returned to her hot and discomfited. He little guessed how coolly critical her glance was.


"I have been recalled from leave," he said. "The regiment is going home. I must start within twenty-four hours."

Valeria drew a quick, startled breath. He was so close to her that he heard it.

"Listen," he said, and he forced himself to speak gently, "this means that I am forced to choose between my profession and career and you — perhaps for ever. Let me choose now. Tell me to stay as you did once, and I will throw up everything, because I love you, love you, love you!"

Valeria had heard those final words again and again, and never without contempt or shrinking. But as Charnley spoke them their whole-hearted passion so thrilled and shook her that she was mute and passive before it. What this man offered her was not wholly of the earth earthy; it was all that his nature held of tenderness and adoration; to him it was the great love.

"You are mad," she said, "and if I were also — what then?"



Charnley's cold hands were gripping the iron rail of the balcony with all their strength.

"To-morrow," he said, "in the morning very early, I would wait with a carriage, and you could slip out by that door into the Strada Margutta and I would join you, and by sunrise we should be at Albano."

"You are mad!" said Valeria once again. Yet for a moment their eyes saw the same picture: the swaying post-chaise, the galloping horses, the grey, desolate country in the grey, desolate dawn. And beyond that picture Valeria saw a new life—poor, adventurous, obscure, but free, and lived with a man who loved her.

"And Felice?" She spoke like one in a dream, hardly aware that her lips had framed the words.

"I will kill him," said Charnley, simply.

It was as if some spell which held her had snapped suddenly.

"Leave me," she cried, "I do not love you. You have deceived yourself; it is impossible that I should ever love you."

She had recoiled against the outer edge of the balcony. He came close to her, and in

the dim light she guessed rather than saw the white fury of his face.

"I have deceived myself?" he questioned. "You would let me go out of your life to-night, knowing that you will never see my face again?"

"It must end so," she answered. "I always knew it; surely you must have known."

"Then you are either the vilest of women, or you love him — love that fellow who insults you, who —"


But the little Princess would not hear him out.

"I love no one," she said, and her voice seemed to have grown suddenly old. "I have no heart. I never believed that you would really love me, I thought you were like the others. I ask you to forgive me."

"Forgive you!" Charnley answered. "You are a despicable coquette, and if I could — at least I will kill him, please God!"

He would have turned away and left her standing there, had she not stretched out her hand and stopped him.

"You will make no scandal," she said; "you will go in with me and take your leave like a gentleman."



He yielded to her will, and while he made his bow to the mistress of the house, she talked gaily; and later, when her host saw her to her carriage, smiled at his jests concerning her "big English cavalier," who could not bear having his light put out, and answered his questions concerning Charnley's approaching departure. Even in her carriage she was not alone. Hours must pass before she would be alone.

In the room she had left the Cavaliere Gavotti was saying to the Elisei, "Our little Princess has laughed too much, I fancy; you know the saying?"

Smiling, the Marchesa quoted, "Who laughs too much will weep soon," and added, "Have you heard that the English are to be forced to give up Malta and go back to their own foggy island?"

Gavotti shrugged his thin shoulders.

"Ah, the English!" he said, "it is hard to make them give up what they have once laid hands on."

"You forget that they have not always the upper hand," answered the Marchesa, frowning.

* * * * *

Charnley had been in at the death of old King Carnival, and had helped him to die game. His companions in that charitable effort — they were persons of modest station, and quite unknown to him — had dubbed him "the mad Englishman," a name that he had amply earned.

Now having evaded their good fellowship, he was on his way home alone. Some remnant of common sense had reminded him that his preparations were still unmade, and that he was to leave Rome at five on the coming morning.

Though he had been drinking heavily, his brain was fairly lucid. Its impressions, however, were limited to the passing moment, and memory had become an apparently physical pain, the twinges of which only troubled him at intervals.

A waning moon barred the narrow black streets with streaks of light, that only served to make the intermediate shadow look blacker by contrast. He entered the Piazza di Spagna by a lane close to the Embassy that gave the place its name: an evil name, thanks to the right by which an ambassador might protect

even murderers who did their work near the walls of his *palazzo*. Hitherto Charnley had sometimes met strayed revellers straggling homeward arm in arm, their much-thrummed guitars silent at last. Now he could hear no footsteps save his own, and neither in the moonlight nor in the shadow did he catch sight of any moving figure. It seemed as though all Rome, worn out by the last week's mad gaiety, had fallen into an exhausted sleep. But he remembered that before many hours had passed, the church bells would clang out for Ash Wednesday's earliest Mass, and the fine ladies who played one another for the souls of men, would put on mourning and go to worship with downcast eyes — hateful, self-conscious hypocrites!

He might have walked in the moonlight, but chose instead to keep on the dark side of the Piazza, as being nearest to the street he lived in.

He passed one opening after another, found he had lost count of them, and stood still. Was this long street at the corner of which he stood the Condotti? Surely the dim lamp he was wont to steer by was farther away than

it should be: the neighbouring alley had its shrine also. He made a step or two forward, and at that instant a man sprang on him from behind. Almost simultaneously a violent blow hurled him forward, and he fell, striking his head against the projecting stonework of the nearest house.

Another dark figure slipped out from a sheltering doorway, and joining his assailant, bent over Charnley, groping in the darkness.

"Dead as a stone — feel for yourself," said one, raising an arm which dropped inertly on the pavement.

"Then the sooner we are off the better," said the other. "Look at that light moving; *per Dio*, it must be the *Sbirri*, and they are coming this way."

As silently as if they had been shod with velvet, the two figures crept along the house fronts, turned down a black alley and vanished.

A quarter of an hour later Ercole, comfortably asleep in his master's arm-chair, feeling a heavy hand laid on his shoulder, opened startled eyes to see Charnley's tall figure standing over him, hatless, with mud-stained hair and dress and a white, rigid face.

He sprang up.

"*Cielo!* what has happened, Eccellenza?"

"I have been wounded," said Charnley;
"some rum, and be quick about it!"

He took the chair Ercole had risen from, and sank back in it with half-closed eyes. He owed his life to the thick folds of his cloak, which had confused the assassin's aim, and to the swift instinctive movement he had made even as the man sprang upon him. A knife-thrust had pierced his shoulder, and, sliding along his shoulder-blade, had inflicted merely a flesh wound. Knocked senseless in falling, by a lucky chance he had lain for some minutes unconscious, and had so passed for dead.

A valet of that period was expected to know something about wounds and their treatment. Ercole proved quite equal to the task of removing his master's blood-soaked coat and shirt, and to the more difficult business of washing and bandaging his wound.

"The brigands must have been frightened from their vile work," he said, in tones of deep sympathy shaken by emotion. "Look, Eccellenza, there is your watch in your fob and that fine seal ring still on your finger."

"There was money in my pockets — see if they have taken that," Charnley said.

Ercole took the coat up, and some loose coin fell from it and rolled across the floor.


"They were no thieves, then," said Charnley, half to himself.

"They must have been frightened away before they had time to plunder your Excellency's person."

Charnley stared at the valet. His eyes were wide open now and feverishly bright.

"Damn you, they were no thieves!" he answered.

He leant back once more in the chair, while Ercole moved softly about, putting the room in order. Sitting there, he saw again the dark street corner, the dark mass of the houses towering above him, the dim light before the far-off shrine, and felt once more the sudden onrush of his assailant. He was infuriated at the thought that he had not so much as attempted to defend himself, and could not realise that three parts drunk, and wholly reckless, he had had no more thought of possible danger than if he had been walking in broad daylight, and could not have been more utterly



taken by surprise had he been set upon in his own village street at home. He recalled Ercole's reiterated suggestion. Had he indeed been tracked and set upon by some ruffian who had shared his mad pranks and knew he had money on him, and had the latter been interrupted before he had time to rob him? He considered the possibility for a minute or two, then dismissed it with contempt. No one was near him when he came to himself, therefore his assailant could not have been put to flight. His valuables were untouched; therefore the object had been not robbery but murder. An assassin could easily be hired in Rome by a man who was rich and powerful. A rich and powerful enemy? He had one such — Felice, Prince Decilis.

Sobered by the shock he had undergone, Charnley was sufficiently himself to reason so far, but his mind once made up, he was incapable of admitting any doubt that might change it.

The Prince hated him. He had read hatred in the mocking eyes of the French soldier — of that much he was certain. And Valeria? Surely in those wretched minutes on the

balcony, and later, when watched by curious eyes, he had kissed her hand — kissed it for the last time — she also had given him hate for hate. Excitement, exhaustion from loss of blood, were doing their work. The first germ of a mad suspicion was born in his fevered brain. Had the little Princess, fearing lest he might promptly carry out his threat, betrayed him to her husband? Had she done more than speak? Had she acted? Was she the enemy who had armed a hand to stab him — his would-be assassin?

He felt that if he sat there enduring the torture of such a suspicion his brain would give way; rather would he risk life itself in the attempt to confirm it or set it at rest for evermore.

Ercole, hearing himself called, came hastily.

“Bring me my brown coat,” said Charnley, “the old one, and my military cloak.”

Ercole’s black eyes dilated. “Is it possible that your Excellency means to go out? But it is madness!”

Charnley repeated his order with the addition of an oath.

Like most Italians the valet resented rough

words; therefore, though he liked Victor Mount, he had more than one secret grudge against his present master. He brought him the required garments and helped him into them without opening his lips, and with an expressionless face. But no sooner had he heard the outer door of the apartment close heavily behind Charnley, than a change came over him which seemed to transform a wooden marionette into an alert, lithe nervous human being.

He took up a hat belonging to his master, crossed the anteroom, made the outer door open and shut without so much as a creak, and ran lightly down the dark staircase.

CHAPTER VII

CHARNLEY reached the street. Before he had walked three yards a slight faintness seized him, obliging him to lean against the nearest wall. It passed after a minute or so, and the sliding ground having become solid again he went on.

The moonlight had gained upon the darkness. The Trinitá Steps shone fair and white in it, and the shadows had retreated into the far corners of the Piazza.

At the opening of the Via Babuino, Charnley crossed to the right-hand side of the road. He had acquired a new aversion to darkness, and black streets where men may wait unseen. He was as completely without fear as before his misadventure, but now he felt that danger was close about him and he went warily, while almost exulting in that sensation. He had not come out unarmed; he carried a pistol

in his coat pocket, and thought he could shoot straight with his left hand. The right was made useless by the position of his wound. The fresh air was an effectual stimulant, and he walked with so rapid a stride that Ercole, slinking along the opposite footway, had hard work to keep him in sight. Presently he stood still before the Palazzo Decilis.

The tall front of the great house was dark and lifeless. Inside the arched doorway the iron gates were shut, but from the door of the porter's lodge a faint ray of light shone out over the pavement.

Charnley had approached the gates, and was asking himself whether he should summon the porter and demand to see the Prince on urgent business, when voices and footsteps in the street made him spring back into the black shadow of the great outer doors, which were only shut at times of civic tumult.

Two men wrapped in long cloaks passed close by him. He could have put out his hand and touched them. It occurred to him that they might well be his assailants of an hour ago. They called "Orazio!" and the porter coming out hastily admitted them.

Both followed him to his lodge door, and one entered it after him, the other remaining on the step outside, but leaning forward so that he might speak to those within. The lodge was some yards distant from the gate and looked into the large inner court.

The man at the door was listening to some good story told inside it, his shoulders shaking with suppressed mirth. He did not hear the gate turn on its hinges, nor look round in time to see a tall dark figure reach the foot of the great staircase and disappear.

Before Charnley rose the long flight of marble steps which he had trodden so often to the tune of quickened pulses. His pulses were throbbing now, yet he thought he had never felt surer of himself. He had a curious sense of regained freedom and self-mastery.

Often as he had visited the *palazzo*, his acquaintance with it was limited to the reception rooms on the *piano nobile* and the private apartments which, contrary to Roman custom, the little Princess had made hers on the floor above. One of the double doors on the first landing stood open, and light and the murmur of voices came from the vestibule within.

Charnley stood still for an instant, but not to hesitate. It seemed to him quite natural that he should pass on unnoticed. He crossed the second landing, opened a door, and entered. There was no one in the dimly-lit anteroom. He turned to the right and opened another door; the *salotto* within it was empty like the anteroom. The air was fragrant with a faint perfume very familiar to him, the scent of dried rose-leaves and sandalwood touched with the sharper smell of burning wood. A fire flamed in the open-fronted porcelain stove, and its flickering light struck across the long room, gleaming on the gilded furniture, and bringing to life grotesque figures on the faded tapestry which covered it. Those figures illustrated "Æsop's Fables," and Charnley had often laughed over them.

He walked toward a low table on which two candles were burning. Valeria must have been sitting near it a few minutes ago. He did not doubt that she would come back again. On the rug at his feet lay a small red Turkish slipper, the very one Valeria had worn at the masked ball. With an oath he picked it up and kissed it, then thrust it hastily into

his coat pocket. The door leading into the inner room was opening, he could hear Valeria's voice.

The little Princess came slowly forward, closing the heavy door behind her. She wore a white *négligé*, and her hair hung in loose curls about her throat and shoulders. A burning log fell forward, sending out a shower of sparks. Valeria looked up and saw Charnley.

He was watching her with a fierce eagerness, half expecting that she would cower away from him, hiding her face. She uttered no sound, and he could not see that she even started.

Long seconds passed: the fire crackled and flared. Someone was moving about softly in the next room. A clock struck with a faint musical chime. Charnley could no longer endure in silence the thought that mere terror kept Valeria mute and motionless. He said, "Come here — speak to me!"

Valeria came quickly and stood before him. He felt a sudden sense of relief as if a cold hand had been laid on his burning temples. Seeing her closer he could not imagine her terror-stricken. She was pale indeed, but her blue eyes had never been more bravely bright.

Then she spoke. "I suppose this is your revenge; my maid is in the room adjoining and will hear everything you say. Perhaps you are not sorry to have a witness?"

Her words were like a blow to him. They seemed a confession of guilt. A moment later they had gone from him, blotted out by a strange feeling of blankness, but the impression they had made remained.

He threw back his cloak. To prevent him from moving his right arm, and so injuring his wounded shoulder, Ercole had put it into a sling, made in haste out of a blood-stained handkerchief.

"You are hurt, wounded!" cried Valeria, wide-eyed.

"Only a flesh-wound in the shoulder that will make my sword-arm useless for a week or two. They thought I was dead—that saved me."

"They? Who?" she cried.

"Ah, that is what I don't know! They set upon me in the Piazza."

Valeria drew a quick, gasping breath.

"They were robbers," she said, "they must have been robbers!"

"No, not robbers," said Charnley. "For they might have robbed me easily, and did not. I struck my head in falling and was left for dead. These assassins were in your husband's pay, I suppose?"

Valeria uttered a stifled cry.

"Or were they in yours?" he went on pitilessly.

The little Princess did not answer him. A great fear had taken hold upon her, a fear which she could not hide. Her face was growing grey, aging by years under his gaze. She turned her head slowly and stared at the door by which Charnley had entered. She was listening intently.

Charnley seized her arm roughly.

"What is it?" he said, "what are you afraid of? You have reason to be afraid."

His voice died between his lips. The little Princess had not shrunk from his grasp, she did not even seem aware of it. The door she was watching opened, and Prince Decilis came in.

The fire had died down, leaving the threshold of the room in shadow, so that Charnley could not clearly see his enemy's face. But at last his enemy was here and would

have to show what mettle he was of. He forgot Valeria, forgot his own helplessness. He had let go Valeria's arm, but as she stood she was between him and Decilis. He put out his left hand mechanically, and thrust her gently back. It was then that Don Felice spoke.

"So it is true," he said. "They told me that you were here, and yet I could not believe it. I did not think you would have the impudence to enter my house quite after this fashion, you drunken hound!"

Charnley grasped the meaning of his words slowly but thoroughly. Decilis had been warned and had entered the room prepared to see him. Instead of being taken by surprise he had had ample time in which to decide on the part he would assume. His cool front proved nothing.

The little Princess stepped forward between the two men.

"He is wounded," she said, "and he accuses you of having sent *bravi* to stab him. Tell him that he lies!"

Decilis looked at her for an instant, and then at Charnley.

"You lie," he said quietly, "and you will have to answer for it."

"You can say what you please," answered Charnley, growing whiter, "you are safe; I can't fight you — yet."

"I understand," answered the Prince, "that the claims of military duty oblige you to leave Rome to-morrow. I hope that our meeting will not be long postponed on that account. Before long I shall be in the kingdom of Naples. I am not a *persona grata* at the court which you English have so valorously defended, and shall not proclaim my arrival in the gazette, but when I inform you of it you will no doubt be able to get leave to visit the mainland?"

Charnley bowed. It was only by a painful effort that he could even partially understand his enemy's smooth ready sentences. The candle-flame danced before his eyes. The whole room was filling with mist. He groped his way toward a chair and dropped into it, deathly faint though retaining consciousness. The little Princess sprang toward him, but Decilis caught her by the wrist.

"No," he said, "you will not revive him

with your smelling-salts, he will have to do without them. Listen, and try to understand what I tell you. Charnley was attacked in the street and took refuge in this house, his friend's house. His valet, becoming uneasy, came to seek him here. Charnley will be sent home with his valet, in my sedan chair. If he objects, we must use force."

"Promise me that you will not hurt him."

The Prince relaxed his hold upon her wrist.

"Do not be ridiculous. I mean to prevent a scandal if possible. Your maid has been listening, of course, but I shall bribe her to hold her tongue. Go into your room now. I will come back and see you presently."

Charnley's strength was slowly coming back to him, and his brain cleared a little. He realised in a measure the hideous wrong he had done Valeria. He would have made any sacrifice save that of his honour to repair it, and sacrifice and reparation were alike impossible. He spoke in a slow, difficult whisper.

"I was mad to come here. Prince, I loved your wife, and she repulsed me with contempt, and now I —"

Don Felice cut him short. "And now all

that remains for you to do is to leave this house, which it is to be regretted that you should have ever entered. Princess, must I again ask you to leave us?"

Valeria at last obeyed him. As she opened the door into her bedroom her maid retreated from it.

The woman was French, and had not served her long. They faced one another in silence, till Valeria said :

"You have been eavesdropping on your own account, I ask you now to eavesdrop on mine. Go back and listen, the more you can hear the greater will be my gratitude."

Lithe and stealthy as a cat the maid went back to her former place. Once there she was very still, nearly as still as Valeria.

The little Princess heard a murmur of voices, then nothing, then the sharp shutting of a door. "What has happened?" she said faintly.

The maid came to her :

"Eccellenza, do not alarm yourself. M. le Prince explained to M. Charnley that he must go home in his sedan chair. M. Charnley objected, but M. le Prince pointed out to him

that in no other way could scandal be avoided, so he consented. I opened the door a crack and saw them go out, M. Charnley looking terrible, like a dead man, and scarcely able to stand."

"It is enough," said Valeria. "Now leave me and go into the *salon*. The Prince will speak to you there."

The woman hesitated. "I told you to go," said Valeria, and the woman went.

Left to herself the little Princess waited with a curious sense of finality and coming doom. Be that doom what it might, she felt that she would not lift a hand to stay it. She knew her utter helplessness.

"If he were about to kill me," she thought, "I might cry to him 'I have always loved you. Other men have been to me as puppets without the breath of life. I have loved you only.' But he does not care enough to kill me."

Not more than ten minutes had gone by when the Prince returned to his wife's apartments. He held a brief conversation with the French maid, and dismissed her.

He then entered the adjoining room. He

looked about him. The candles on the dressing-table had burnt low. Valeria sat with her back toward him, her face and figure scarcely distinguishable from the surrounding shadow.

"It is dark here," said Decilis, "and rather cold. Will you not come back into the *salon*?"

Valeria shivered.

She could see that other room with the fire in the tall white stove burning brightly. Charnley standing near it, stared at her with unhuman eyes.

"No," she answered, "let me stay here."

"Then I will go and fetch more lights," said the Prince.

He went into the *salon* and came back carrying two massive silver candlesticks, and having set them on a table lit all their candles. Valeria watched him. Never had his face and manner been more masklike; never had she been less ready to believe that they hid any common human feeling—even the common human passions of hatred and revenge. Yet a minute or two before she had felt the sense of an impending doom. Even now she half be-

lieved that he had instigated the attack upon Charnley.

Decilis stood looking down at her.

"I have been trying my best to prevent an open scandal. I would rather it came slowly, though I begin to see it must come in the end. No one will believe that you go to San Cataldo for your own pleasure."

Valeria sat upright and gazed at him.

After a minute she spoke, "You are going to send me to San Cataldo?"

"Yes."

"You mean to leave me there — always?"

"That is a word one can hardly use in these days. Circumstances may change, but I believe that, so far as I am concerned, it will be your home for the future."

"And yet you know that what Charnley said was true."

"Know?" Decilis answered. "Do not suppose me so presumptuous as to suppose I know anything — except that you have at last overstepped my patience."

"I understand," said the little Princess. "I have long been superfluous in your life, and here is a good opportunity to thrust me


out of it. Instead of truly trying to prevent a scandal you have provoked one, because it will be your only possible excuse for the way in which you mean to treat me."

Don Felice's pale face flushed.

"Be silent!" he said. "All Rome will believe that Charnley is your lover, if it does not believe it already, and you have only him to thank for it. What can you expect, when you choose to flatter and befool a man who is not even what these English call a gentleman?"

"He asked me to leave Rome with him," said the little Princess, "he was ready to risk death and ruin for me, he is a man, and a brave man."

For a little while there was silence between them. Valeria was regretting bitterly her attempt at self-defence. He would neither accuse her nor own that he believed her innocent. He did not care enough about the matter. And yet he cared enough to hate Charnley. She had realised that in that one respect she had done him injustice, and once more his words at the ball came back to her fraught with a new, dark meaning.



She rose to her feet. "Felice," she said, "by your will I am to go away. I had never much share in your life, henceforward I shall have none; it will be as if I had died. Will you grant me one favour? Will you swear to me that not only you had nothing to do with the attack upon Charnley, but that you could not have prevented it if you would?"

"Ah," said Decilis, "so he is a brave man in your eyes and I am a would-be assassin who makes a clumsy attempt at murder! I will tell you nothing but this. I will kill him if I get the chance, and remember, I cannot, however much I might wish to do so, shut you up as in a prison; your father would make an outcry. You will be free to leave San Cataldo and join Charnley, but if you do I will kill you also. And now I wish you a happy night."

He walked rapidly away through the darkened sitting room and the vestibule beyond it, and descended the great staircase, lit only by gleams of moonlight. Before reaching his own apartment he had to cross a vast chamber, half hall, half corridor, set round with dim white marble forms and hung with age-darkened canvases.

Close to the door by which he was about to leave it, hung a portrait in the full moonlight. He looked up at it. He seldom passed by that ancestor of his — a young man in the sombre Spanish dress of the late sixteenth century — without glancing at him. Of this man who was also his namesake, Felice, Prince Decilis, it was told that having reason to suspect his wife's virtue he killed her supposed lover in a duel, and mutilated his body, cutting off his right hand which he carried to his wife Donna Antonia Decilis, the said hand having a ring upon it which had been her gift.

It seemed to him that to-night Don Felice's pale face looked down upon him with an expression of contemptuous pity. He made an impatient gesture and passed on.

CHAPTER VIII

FOUR whitewashed walls, broken here and there and roughly patched with plaster; two pictures hung thereon, coloured prints of St. John Baptist in his goat-skin and Queen Caroline of Naples in almost equally scanty classic costume; a long wooden chest, once painted and gilded, now darkened by secular dirt; the posts and canopy of an ancient four-post bedstead and a dirty striped counterpane; these were the things on which Gilbert Charnley's eyes rested when he lay fever stricken at the inn at Fondi.


Even in his delirium they haunted his brain, taking to themselves a hideous unreality. The canopy overhead would be coming slowly and surely down to crush him, or the long chest turn into a coffin where he lay a living corpse tight bound in his grave-clothes, while Queen Caroline, who had become the little Prin-

cess, stepped down out of her fly-spotted frame and stood beside him mocking him.

As for the figure which stole stealthily in and out of the room, or sat motionless opposite him, dark against the curtained window, it was a devil from hell who bore a certain likeness to Ercole.

There were periods when he was restored to the sordid realities of a sick-room, and a sense of his own miserable helplessness. Then he would count the unsightly blotches on the wall made by French bullets four years ago, when the streets of Fondi ran with blood ; never reaching the same number twice over.

On these occasions it was unmistakably Ercole who sat in the window, often leaning out over its sill to signal to his friends going about their business in the court below. Ercole had become his own master, or rather his master's master. If he chose he went away and left Charnley alone without any means of summoning him. He assured him repeatedly that he had only himself to thank for his evil plight. He had insisted upon leaving Rome with an unhealed wound. He had insisted upon driving through the Pontine Marshes at



an early and unhealthy hour of the morning. Behold the consequences!

Extreme weakness and physical dependence had so subdued Charnley that while he cursed the fellow he feared him. He had caught fragments of talk exchanged outside the half-open door by Ercole and the inn-keeper: "Will he live?" a voice had asked. "I doubt it," said Ercole, "but whether he lives or dies you will not be the loser."

The fear that haunted him had its root in those words, and in some half-remembered fancy of his delirium. He was almost certain that Ercole meant to stab him one night while he slept. There was the long chest, a convenient receptacle for his body, and the landlord would gladly hold his tongue and share the profits of the murder. Charnley managed to secrete a clasp-knife which he kept hidden in the ragged mattress. At night he would draw it out and open it, and lie listening to Ercole's movements till sleep overtook him unawares and he fought for his life in feverish dreams.

With returning strength this dread lost its hold, yet it prompted him to conceal from

Ercole with elaborate ingenuity the fact that he was very slowly recovering. When alone he would get out of bed and wrap a cloak round him, and stagger toward the window, steadying himself by the wall, and leaning on a stick. But in his servant's presence he simulated complete exhaustion.

Restlessness and impatience tortured him. He had completely lost count of time and dared not ask how many days he had spent at Fondi. The thought that he was under orders to rejoin his regiment, and that his regiment was under orders to return home, never left him now for more than a few minutes, and its obsession retarded his recovery.

What he found it hardest to hide was his growing appetite. One day Ercole had gone downstairs to fetch his luncheon. This was a lengthy matter, since if the fancy took him Ercole ate his own lunch first before bringing up his master's.

Charnley got out of bed and made his usual pilgrimage toward the window, over what had once seemed to him an endless space of floor. To-day he even hurried, hearing

through the open window postilions shouting, hoofs clattering, and wheels grating sharply on the stones of the inn yard. He had an absurd, vague hope that the newcomers might be friends of his who would do something for him, perhaps take him away with them. He still doubted if he would ever leave Fondi alive, and his one longing, night and day, was to feel a fresh wind blowing in his face as he drove away from that hateful spot, never to see it more. He thrust back the window and leaned out.

In the court close below him stood a mud-splashed carriage, not a heavy coach, but a light well-built chaise. A man stood at its door, wearing a grey and rose-coloured livery. Prince Decilis came quickly across the court, hat in hand. The servant stepped back so that his master might take his place. Charnley could see distinctly the sunlit stones, and his enemy's graceful, nonchalant figure, and presently another figure, for the little Princess stepped down out of the carriage, resting one hand on her husband's arm.

As, standing still, she set her hat straight, Charnley saw the diamonds glisten on her

fingers, but could not see her face. She moved away beside Don Felice, her maid following her, and the man-servant strolled forward again and chattered to the ostlers who were taking out the horses. It seemed to Charnley as if a mist blurred their movements, and the sunlit pavement rose in waves. He crossed the room somehow, and flung himself on his bed, groaning. He thanked God that Valeria had not looked up. That she should see him now, unkempt, unshaved, and ghastly, would indeed be an unbearable humiliation! He recalled that afternoon when he had taken his first walk in the Corso, curious, amused, and on the lookout for some excitement, and how a girl's face in a passing carriage had turned toward him, to the satisfaction of his desire. So had it begun; and how had it ended? Miserably for him; and for her? Was this journey the prelude to some vengeance on her husband's part, which was to include her? The Prince was going south with the intention of fighting him, Charnley. But why should he take Valeria with him? This was not a time of year when she could wish to visit his Neapolitan estates, and he

had especially mentioned that he was not a *persona grata* at the Bourbon Court.

But he forgot Valeria, as a fresh torture seized upon him. The Prince would seek him in vain, and would believe him to be a coward.

He was meditating upon this probability when Ercole returned, carrying the luncheon tray. In these days he did not trouble himself to conceal his passing emotions as of old. His look and manner were important, with a hint of mystery.

"Eccellenza," he said, dropping his voice, while he placed a cushion behind Charnley's shoulders. "Eccellenza, some fresh guests have just arrived here. They will not stop the night, they are only baiting on their way, and you will never guess —"

"I have seen them," said Charnley, curtly, cutting him short.

Ercole made an amazed gesture. "Seen them! But how, then?"

"From the window."

"Your Excellency has been walking about the room."

His master did not answer, but took up his knife and fork. The fork slipped between

fingers that trembled, and Ercole caught it as it slid over the striped counterpane. He had recovered himself, and was smiling insinuatingly: "I know one of the Signora Principessa's footmen, your Excellency, and if you will write a little note, he could no doubt give it to his mistress. It would be a risk, certainly a risk, but I would arrange it."

"Go to the devil!"

Before the white rage in Charnley's face Ercole drew back alarmed, then remembering how weak his master was, stood still.

"Well, well, your Excellency must pardon my zeal," he said sneeringly, "if you do not require my services. You do not care to know where the lady is going, it does not interest you — why should it? She will depart presently, and we — shall remain here."

Charnley ordered him to leave the room and he obeyed, and ran downstairs singing. A door banged, and then a silence heavy with desertion and loneliness took possession of that wing of the house in which Charnley's rooms were situated.

Charnley pushed away the food he had been making a pretence of eating, and getting up

painfully dragged a chair with him to the window. There was a wisp of curtain, put up to keep the light from his eyes. He drew it and peered out through a rent in it.

Nearly an hour passed. The hostlers made their appearance, followed by the postilion. The horses were put into the little Princess's carriage, the coachman mounted the box and drove the empty chaise out of the yard, the two footmen strolling after it.

Charnley remembered that there was a little garden the gate of which opened on the road. Valeria and her husband would go out that way after drinking coffee under the *pergola*. No doubt the latter was aware of his presence in the inn; Ercole had perhaps offered him his services, offered to do him a good turn by ridding the world of a certain Gilbert Charnley. He guessed that there had been some treachery in the part played by Ercole on the night before he left Rome. But the valet had urged extreme anxiety as his excuse for following his master to the Palazzo Decilis, and Charnley could not afford just then to quarrel with so indispensable a companion. He had mis-trusted him thenceforward.

He heard the dull roll of carriage wheels.

The little Princess was driving away beside her husband. How the rings on her fingers had glittered ! He could have counted them, and yet he had not seen her face. He would never see it again. The chances were a thousand to one that it would be impossible for him to "meet" Don Felice, and he would remain branded in Valeria's memory as a man who had outraged her by a vile suspicion, had tried to ruin her, and then, doubly a coward, had evaded the consequences of his actions.

During the last two days he had been taking a fresh grip on life. Now it seemed to him that he was deliberately loosening his hold. Like some physical burden a heavy, listless indifference oppressed him. He lay down again and fell asleep.

When he awoke the window shutters had blown to, and, deceived by the darkness, he fancied it was already night. He realised that someone was standing outside the door of his room. Listening intently, he could hear a quick breathing. He groped in his mattress for the hidden knife and could not find it. The door which was ajar opened slowly, and

a short, broad-shouldered figure stood framed in daylight on the threshold.

"*Chi è?*" said Charnley, bewildered.

"*Chi è!*" an English voice echoed. "Why, God bless me, it's dark in here, dark as pitch! I can't see you, and you can't see me."

The speaker bustled across the room, flung back the shutters, swearing under his breath as he did so.

The light blazed in Charnley's eyes, and something else helped to dim them. He tried to raise himself and sank back weakly among the pillows.

"Victor Mount," he said half aloud — "Victor Mount's in Florence. It's another of those damned delusions."

He closed his eyes for a moment and opened them to find his friend standing at his bedside, looking down at him with a perturbed countenance.

"Charnley, my boy," he said, "upon my honour I am no delusion. I've been travelling night and day to get here. I'm as tired as a dog, and as hungry as a wolf. That's the difference between me and a delusion.

I have an empty stomach, and a delusion, though empty, has none."

Charnley stretched out a gaunt hand, and Mount gripped it, silent for once.

That night Gilbert Charnley slept for eight hours, and no ill dreams did him molest. He woke to a delicious sense of relief and security which almost made up for sufferings he was ready enough to forget and fears which he could already smile at.

Mount was beside his bed, and sitting there in the grey light of the early morning told him that it was thanks to the Princess Decilis that he had travelled post-haste from Florence to Rome, and from thence had tracked him to Fondi. The letter he had received from Valeria he had destroyed at her request, but he could almost repeat it word for word. It had said that he must return at once to Rome, as his friend had been accidentally wounded, and was in need of his help and protection. It begged him not to delay a day or an hour.

"Was there nothing about herself?" asked Charnley.

"Only this; at the end she wrote, 'I have

been a bad friend to him, but I never meant it.' ”

Later, when Mount was in possession of all the facts, Charnley explained his plans to him. He would effect an exchange if possible with some man in the regiments which were remaining at Malta. Then Mount must communicate with the Prince and ascertain his whereabouts.

This much having been settled and another weight lifted from his mind, Charnley recovered rapidly, and was soon able to continue his journey southwards.

CHAPTER IX

THERE are places on this earth of ours where time is change, ever breathing into its children new hopes, new ideals, new fancies, so that the grandfather is a man of other days, almost a man of another world from his grandson. And there are places where time brings no change save "seedtime and harvest, the former and the latter rain"; and men sing the same songs, and play the same games, work with the same tools, love and hate, live and die, as did their remote forefathers.

Thus San Cataldo, on a spur of the Lower Apennines, had ever dwelt in the shadow of the middle ages, and will dwell in it perhaps to the end. Such as it had been from the first such it was in the early years of the last century, a tiny village cropping out between the rocks wherever a little space of

earth made room for four walls and an olive patch, overshadowed by a gaunt Norman castle's crenellated walls and towers. Below it lay a belt of chestnut woods, and below these, where the steep hillside had become a gentle slope, stretched the fields and vineyards of the villagers. But San Cataldo looked far beyond woods and vineyards, over a narrow valley which curved outwards between fertile slopes till it became one with the barren fever-stricken plain whose farthest limit is the glitter of the sea.

Near the valley's mouth, miles away, but visible from the village on the mountain side, rise the roofs of Casaluccio, a little town.

Sometimes Father Time, as if growing impatient of the remote nooks and corners where he leaves so faint a trace, sends forth an irresistible breath which, making no account of sea or mountains, sweeps across the world — bringing to some "a mighty hope," to others a vague restlessness, and to others horror and dread. Such a breath in the late eighteenth century had convulsed Europe, and had stirred even San Cataldo.

Don Stefano Petrella, the parish priest, told his flock how the French, an impious people, first rebelled against their anointed rulers, then killed them, and drove into exile their nobles and their priests. But Don Stefano prophesied that the kings of the earth, rising to defend their brethren, would let loose upon that impious nation the irresistible wrath of God ; never even in his most solemn warnings and forebodings did he foretell that the impious nation would spread over the face of the earth, killing, plundering, and destroying, till they entered the very kingdom of Naples. Yet this was what really came to pass.

If Don Stefano's power to read the future had failed him, his courage to meet present danger did not. In the pulpit and out of it he exhorted his flock to rise and drive out the rash invader. When at his bidding they made ready, furbishing up old muskets and sharpening terrible knives, Don Stefano made ready also, and never doubting that his place was with the fighting men rather than at home with the women and the aged and the little ones, put himself at their head. And the villagers witnessed with wonder and admiration the

sudden change that transformed a gentle, silent, absent-minded man nearing old age into one in the prime of life, alert, resolute, and fiery-eyed.

Don Gennaro Vierci, steward to Prince Decilis, and the only man whose influence might perhaps have countermined the priest's, thought neutrality the safest course, while his own nephew, Don Mario, preached in other words the same sermon as Don Stefano, and like him capped his preaching by his practice, becoming second in command of the band of volunteers.

The little troop thus raised and led did worthy service on many a nameless battle-field, in many a hot skirmish and fatal ambush, an obscure fraction of that heroic peasant army to whose valour a French general thus testifies :

“Though . . . they were beaten everywhere, though, without counting the losses they sustained in battle, more than sixty thousand of them were put to the sword among the ruins of their towns and the ashes of their cottages, at no point did we leave them conquered.”

In this spirit did the San Cataldesi return home, defeated but not conquered, proud of

their achievements, and fierce still with the fierceness of wild beasts who have tasted human blood. The French were in Naples and in Taranto, nearer far than Naples, and Don Stefano, though not among the dead was among the missing, hiding in lonely *masserie*, or in the shepherds' huts among the mountains, with a price upon his head.

Don Mario had vanished, no man knew whither, and down in Casaluccio men talked of a new rule which was to bring peace and plenty and money that would be safely put by and no longer paid into Don Gennaro's grasping hands, and sent to fill the coffers of a Roman prince. But the good folk of San Cataldo had small faith in the new era — the village and the town always took opposite sides if possible — and their doubts were amply justified. The rumour went abroad that Prince Decilis himself was a revolutionary, or at all events a good friend to the French, who then ruled Rome; and whether this was true, as Casaluccio believed, or false — San Cataldo would have fought to prove it — Don Gennaro continued to collect his master's dues as of old. Moreover, the French demanded a

"contribution" toward which all were forced to pay.

Gladly did the San Cataldesi obey the summons of King Ferdinand and Cardinal Ruffo, though this time they did not first assemble to receive the blessing of the Church, but slipped secretly away by twos and threes. It was a proud day for the village which brought them back marching along the road from Casaluccio with Don Stefano at their head. The French had abandoned Naples, the forts had surrendered, the English fleet was in the bay, the liberals were being shot down in batches, the "good cause" had triumphed.

After that, life seemed to drop into the old groove again, with no changes save the old familiar ones, and if men left the village it was to work in the fields round Casaluccio, or to go on pilgrimage with their wives and children in the month of May. Don Stefano celebrated Mass once more in the little white-washed church below the castle, and was merely a little greyer and gentler and more absent-minded than of old.

But for all that the breath of change was blowing still. In the twilight of an early

spring evening Don Stefano Petrella left his presbytery and followed the road leading to the castle. All day long the rain had fallen, only ceasing toward sunset. From the ravine on his left the *fumare*, beating against the stones as it raced plainwards, sent up a continual dull roar. The road, a steep twisting pathway, had been washed till the bed-rock showed in streaks through the thin soil. Here and there its wet, grey surface shone dully, reflecting some sudden space of clear sky between the drifting cloud-masses overhead.

Don Stefano hurried on. His was not the sure step of the born mountaineer. His tall lean figure with one angle, the right shoulder, perceptibly higher than the other, seemed to drift forward rather than to walk, yet he covered the ground rapidly. By instinct he avoided stones, and stepped over trickling watercourses.

His whole mind was absorbed in a puzzled wonder, touched with suppressed excitement. For he was not on his way to visit Don Genaro who occupied room in the castle. He obeyed a summons which had reached him half an hour ago, brought by a man who,

though a stranger, wore a familiar livery. It was to the effect that the Princess Decilis requested the Signore Curato to do her the honour of visiting her, if possible, without delay.

Don Stefano asked no questions, but obeyed to the letter a request which could hardly have amazed him more had it come from King Ferdinand himself. No one had come down from the castle to tell him that their Excellencies Prince and Princess Decilis, Count and Countess of San Cataldo, had arrived there — not even a rumour had startled the village, or it would have reached him also. At nine o'clock the evening before, when his flock was already sleeping, Don Stefano sitting over his books had heard through the wind's howl the beat of horses' hoofs, had listened astonished, then, as the storm raged louder, had assured himself that his fancy must have played him false.

Their Excellencies were strangers to him. Eight or nine years ago Don Felice had spent a summer at the castle. The troubled state of the country was a sufficient explanation for the fact that he had not revisited it. The old priest believed that by leading his flock

to battle he must have gained the great man's enmity.

Did not the Prince pose as what he would call a "patriot," though he had not taken so active a part in public events as to have incurred any suffering for his opinions? Don Stefano despised him. It was indeed a mystery that this man's wife, who was half Piedmontese, half English, should visit Apulia for the first time suddenly, and at the worst season of the year, and, without letting twenty-four hours pass, should send an urgent message bidding him visit her.

The road ended abruptly at the castle gates, massive wooden gates set between grey mediæval bastions. A postern stood open, and Don Stefano passed through it and down a paved passageway shut in by high walls till he reached a door which admitted him to an inner court. This he crossed and found himself at the foot of a broad stone staircase that seemed to mount into darkness. In reality it was lit here and there by narrow barred windows, but over these dense cobwebs spread like a curtain defying the dim evening light.

Don Stefano knew his way. The staircase opened on to a wide corridor running the whole length of the central and more modern part of the building. With its bare marble floor, its time-worn but splendid tapestries representing the exodus from Egypt, its busts and statues, its cushioned benches on which no one ever sat, its carved and gilded doors which so seldom opened, it had always impressed the old priest's imagination as the ideal of magnificent aristocratic dreariness. To-day, when he stepped out from under the vaulted stairway, a man-servant stood up and bowed before him.

"The *Signora Principessa*?" he said questioningly.

"Her Excellency awaits the *Signore Curato*," the man answered.

He took from Don Stefano his hat, his cloak, and his heavy walking-stick. The priest relinquished them half reluctantly. He felt nervous. He had a quiet contempt for great ladies who were also fine ladies, an instinctive ingrained prejudice against them. Yet neither contempt nor prejudice could keep him quite cool and collected.

On the threshold of the room into which he was ushered he started a little and hung back. Such a fire as had not burnt there in the memory of man was glowing on the wide, brick hearth and roaring up the chimney; its leaping light shone in his eyes and dazzled them. The wide space before him seemed empty, except for a single carved high-backed arm-chair. Then out of it there rose what he thought to be the figure of a girl child. He hurried forward and stumbled, catching his foot in something soft and dark and heavy.

It was not a dignified entrance, and the little Princess suppressed a smile. Yet when she looked into Don Stefano's face her momentary amusement vanished. It suggested a dreamer rather than a man of action to one who, seeing the narrow brow half hidden by a thin fringe of grey hair, the erratically *retroussé* nose, the slow-glancing, doglike brown eyes, overlooked the firm lines of the wide mouth and short, broad chin. Valeria overlooked nothing, and recalling what she had heard of her visitor she shrank a little—inwardly.

The servant had brought forward another great chair, and Valeria begged the priest to be seated.

Don Stefano did not at once comply. Though he no longer saw in the Princess Decilis a child, he thought as he looked at her of those golden-haired slave children in the Roman market-place whom St. Gregory saw and pitied. Surely she was like them; they also, doubtless, were pale and heavy-eyed, they also were angelically fair.

Valeria tried to speak lightly. "I apologise for the bearskin, Signore Curato; it is a trap for the unwary, but I could find no other rug."

"Ah, yes, it is a bearskin," said Don Stefano, "thank you, Signora Principessa."

He sat down, and his long, thin figure took an awkward, constrained attitude.

"I have to apologise for something worse," Valeria said, "I have brought you out into the cold and wet; my excuse is that I am a stranger here, and solitary, most solitary."

"You are very gracious—but the Signore Principe, is he not here?" He asked the question abruptly, almost sharply.

"My husband left the castle early this morning."

"Left the castle and passed through the village unnoticed? That is astonishing. I should have believed it impossible, Signora Principessa."

"Perhaps it would have been," Valeria said, "but he did not do it. Last evening we dined at the house of the lawyer Don Niccolò Prinetti, which as you know is on the outskirts of Casaluccio. Later we rode on here. It was arranged that the Prince's carriage, which he left at Prinetti's, should be waiting for him on the road this morning and he went down to join it on foot."

Don Stefano looked hard at her. His eyes had a way of suddenly losing their usual absent far-away expression, while a dull spark glowed in their depths.

"Then we shall not have the honour of seeing him — till he returns?"

"He will not return."

A space of silence followed that answer. Outside the high, narrow windows the light was fast dying out of a sky cloudless at last. The wind had completely dropped.

"Last night the wind kept me awake," said the little Princess, speaking more to herself than her visitor, "to-night it will be the stillness . . . Don Stefano, I would rather you should hear the truth from me than piece it out for yourself. I am here because I have quarrelled with the Prince my husband. He accuses me," she lifted her head and spoke slowly and proudly, "no, he does not even accuse me. He takes advantage of the fact that appearances were against me, to treat me as if I were guilty. I am to stay here during his good pleasure, and if it were possible for me, which it is not, to get my pardon by asking for it, I would rather lay my bones here."

The priest's eyes rested on her for a moment, then looked beyond her into the gathering gloom.

"Do your parents consent to, and approve of, this arrangement, Signora Principessa?"

Valeria answered with a flash of indignation, "They do not even know of it."

"Had you then no time to inform them?"

"I had neither time nor inclination. Whether they know it a few weeks earlier or a few weeks later can make no difference. My

father is a Piedmontese, Bonaparte has confiscated his estates. He is a ruined man. He is with his King. He has no hold or influence over Don Felice, for my fortune came to me from my mother's family. I might indeed take refuge with him and my stepmother, but I should only be a burden upon those who have burdens enough already."

"This is no place for you," the priest answered; "the peace will not last long, and then the French may once more overrun the country. They hold Taranto at this moment, so as to keep a footing in it."

"The French?" said Valeria. "You forget. I have no need to fear them, my husband's opinions are well known."

"You look upon them as friends, perhaps, in spite of your parents' misfortunes?" Don Stefano had a curiously gentle absent-minded way of speaking which, as it were, neutralised his words, and made it hard to resent them.

Said Valeria, "I am half English, Signore Curato, and I was in Rome when the French marched into it, and marched out of it — only to come back in triumph. They promised Rome freedom and prosperity, and they plun-

dered her. No one has any right to call the French my friends."

She drew a quick sigh and leant back wearily in her chair. Through the minutes of silence which followed she watched Don Stefano though seeming hardly aware of his presence. Placed as she was, it was for her a serious question whether she would gain the good-will of this obscure parish priest. And she was discouraged. The question, she thought, had already been answered in the negative. As a priest and as a man he would inevitably distrust her. He was of the south and she was half a foreigner, the wife of one whom he looked upon as his country's enemy, the enemy of his Church and King. He was a priest, and through all the years of a long life had been learning to understand women and despise them. Yet he bore no likeness to the courtly Monsignori and Abbati she had known in Rome. They were men of the world; he was not. Some instinct told her that in spite of every dividing influence they might have been friends. She could not doubt that a pure and lofty soul looked out of those strange, visionary eyes of his.

While these thoughts were in her mind she saw his face soften. He leaned forward.

"Signora Principessa, what is there that I can do for you?" His voice had a new inflection, a new warmth of tone.

"I want so many things," she answered, "and some which no human being can give me."

"Some, perhaps," rejoined Don Stefano, "which only God's mercy can give you. But there are other things . . . have you a good and faithful servant who cares for nothing so much as your interests? Such an one may be very insignificant and yet a treasure beyond price."

Valeria shook her head.

"The man who showed you in is an honest, faithful fellow, but my maid is a woman whom I neither like nor trust and would willingly replace."

"The sooner the better," said Don Stefano, slowly. "I have friends in Casaluccio who may know of someone. I will see about it — with your gracious permission."

"A thousand thanks."

Even as the little Princess answered, a suspicion darted into her mind, an unbidden, un-

welcome doubt. Supposing the priest wished to set a spy upon her, from political or other motives? She had made his game easy. "What does it matter?" she thought bitterly. "Have I anything to hide?"

"I never expected to live in an ancient castle," she said aloud. "They are imposing, but terribly inconvenient. This room, for instance, is almost the only one which has a fireplace, and what is a fire of logs in a room as big as a church? Don Gennaro tells me it used to be the guard-room. I cannot build up walls, but a man who knew how might make some screens for me."

By the time Don Stefano rose and took his leave he had promised that besides inquiring after a suitable maid for the Princess, he would provide her with a man who understood carpentry and that not later than the following morning.

"One moment," said Valeria, with a detaining gesture. "What kind of person is Don Gennaro? He is old and deaf and understands little of what I say to him, which is my excuse for troubling you with the matter."

"He is an honest man," the priest answered

without hesitation, "who has served his masters faithfully. But he has lived here in the castle till he has become like a bit of moss on its walls. Leave him in his niche, Signora Principessa, he asks for nothing more. At no one's bidding would he risk losing it."

When he was near the door he looked back once, and saw again the small, slight figure, half hidden in such a chair as some great temporal or spiritual lord might sit in at a council table. The blond head had sunk back wearily; underfoot the great bearskin made a dark blot on the marble. That was the picture he carried with him down the stairway and out into the starlit night.

PART II



CHAPTER X

A SENSE of rest had come to the little Princess. It was as if a fever of mind and body which had oppressed her during many restless days had passed away, leaving her worn out, but tranquil.

Presently she fell asleep. She dreamt, and the sights and sounds she had lately seen and heard were with her once again. She was in a travelling carriage, quite dark, except when the light of lanterns flashed in at the window. She could feel the fresh night air and hear the click of the harness and the sucking tread of horses' hoofs upon a marshy road, and the driver's shrill voice shouting objurgations. Outside, in the night, men kept riding wildly up and down, Don Felice among them, clad in white and masked, as at the Carnival; inside, a dark, still figure sat opposite her, muffled in a cloak. She longed to pull back the cloak

and uncover what it hid, and yet she dared not, and her fear grew, and sickened her. And then suddenly the cloak fell back, and it was the Prince who sat opposite her. He smiled at her in a gleam of lamplight, and took her hands and kissed them, and she felt a vague restfulness and content, and so passed beyond the region of dreams.

Don Stefano Petrella had reached home.

On entering the narrow passage, where he instinctively bent his head, because the wooden ceiling was so close above it, he heard a murmur of voices proceeding from the parlour.

"It is Graciosa," he thought, "and someone else — it is easy to guess who."

Graciosa came forward to meet him, a huge and very stout elderly woman, with an ugly, good-tempered face. Behind her a man, rising from his chair, wished the master of the house good evening.

"Good evening, Mario," returned the priest. "I have been out late, as you see. Perhaps you will be so good as to take supper with me?"

"It would be a great pleasure, *padre mio*, but I am due at the castle; it is long since I

have paid my uncle a visit, and I must not disappoint him again."

Graciosa had left the room. Mario Vierci resumed his seat, having waited, however, till his host, by a gesture, had invited him to do so.

Don Gennaro's elder brother, far from clinging to his native place as moss clings to a wall, had been a seafaring man and a wanderer. On one occasion his return from a distant voyage was marked by the fact that he did not come back alone. He brought with him a white-faced child, whose lips were thicker than those of most children, and whose black hair had a noticeable crispness. Don Mario — once that motherless and forlorn child — was now a man of over thirty. His face remained white; no sun, however fierce, could tan its colourless, hairless skin. He wore his hair unfashionably short, and the shape of his lips was less noticeable now than in his childhood, but the trace of an alien race was faintly visible in every line of the low brow, the flattish nose, and prominent mobile chin. His small black eyes had a steady gaze. They were the eyes of one used to

command, while lesser folk obeyed. He carried his head high, and was dressed like a gentleman.

With the triumph of the good cause, Don Stefano had become once more Don Stefano, a simple soul, so wrapped in dreams that it was almost too easy to outwit him, whereas Don Mario had returned to be the idol of the country-side. Who did not know how, serving in Cardinal Ruffo's army, he had risen to be the Black Devil's lieutenant, and gained a reputation almost as sinister as that of his eminent commander? Stories told of him and by him were retold at the fireside in winter-time, repeated over and over again with savage exultation, and yet with shuddering. There were some which froze the blood of women, and could not be so much as hinted at in Don Stefano's hearing, which would live to haunt the race as hideous legends. And their hero, who had always been a ne'er-do-well, the black sheep of a much respected family, was now a man of substance, who had bought a house and settled down in Casaluccio and gained an influence which promised to rival that of the Syndic himself. Casaluccio

was purged of its Jacobinism, thanks, San Cataldo felt sure, to her own illustrious son.

"As you have doubtless heard," said Don Stefano, "last night unexpected visitors arrived at the castle."

"Yes, I have heard it. They dined with Don Niccolò Prinetti, and came on here late, in that dog's weather. I wonder they did not sleep at Prinetti's."

"They were in a hurry, I fancy," answered the priest. "As you have no doubt heard also, I received a summons this evening, and have just returned from the castle."

"And what did his Excellency Don Felice Decilis say for himself?"

"It was impossible that he should say anything, since he left at daybreak."

Don Mario's face literally darkened, as a dusky colour overspread it. His lips twitched as if forming inaudible words.

"Then you were not aware of it?" Don Stefano's tone was placidly inquiring.

"No; but I knew at ten to-day that they had arrived, whereas here, in San Cataldo, a stone's throw below the castle, you knew nothing, as I understand, till an hour ago."

"Ten o'clock," returned Don Stefano, speaking with the same unruffled gentleness. "It was already too late. The Signore Principe started very early, on foot, by the lower path. His carriage was waiting for him in the road."

"And he returns — when?"

"I have received no information on that point."

"But I have, *padre mio*, though I cannot vouch for its truth. It is to the effect that he came here only as his wife's escort, and the poor lady will remain here alone, since she cannot help herself. No doubt you can tell me if this is so?"

"Yes, it is so."

Don Mario was silent for a moment, then he laughed.

"We all know what it means when a nobleman sends his wife to live on the most remote property he possesses. He does that when a humbler man would take to his stick, or perhaps his knife. We can all guess what kind of lady the Signora Principessa must be, though of course we must keep our opinion to ourselves."

"It would be wiser," Don Stefano answered.

"The longer I live, the plainer I see how little I know my fellow-creatures. I have known you, my son, since you were two-foot high, and though I know, perhaps, more about you than you suppose, what is my knowledge? Truly, a small matter. There are many barriers between me and the Princess. To begin with, she is a woman."

"Women, in my small experience, are all alike, *padre mio*, whatever their rank may be."

"Yes, I have heard many men say that—I may even have said it myself when I was young; nevertheless, it is a great piece of foolishness. I will give you my opinion of Donna Valeria, because, though you would fain hear it, you would hardly have the boldness to ask me for it. I believe her to be an innocent and injured woman. She is certainly a brave woman. Another would have been wringing her hands and bemoaning her hard fate. She asked me to find her a carpenter who would make her some screens to keep the draughts out."

Don Mario nodded thoughtfully. "The English, when they are not mad, are a clever

people, and she is half English. She is wise to make the best of things. It was also wise to send for you without delay, *padre mio*, since she knows that you are an influential person."

Don Stefano frowned slightly. "It is possible," he said.

"She also showed her courage, *padre mio*, for you have the reputation of being a terrible man. And now it is time for me to go."

Throughout the interview his manner had been that of a man who, meaning to be deferential, cordial, and in a just measure independent, is troubled by an uneasy consciousness that he has not quite carried out his intentions. The oath he muttered outside the presbytery door expressed at once his sense of relief and his annoyance at feeling it.

Don Gennaro Vierci, the Prince's steward, occupied rooms in a side wing of the castle. His widowed niece kept house for him, and had brought her three children with her.

The old man was sitting in the room where he did his business, trying to decipher a list Donna Valeria had given him.

Suddenly a hand, gripping his shoulder, made him start violently. Being deaf, he had

not heard footsteps in the outer passage or the opening of the door behind him.

"Good day, my uncle," said his nephew, bending over him, speaking low, but with much movement of his supple lips. "Why have you let all this accursed day go by without sending me so much as a message?"

The old man's gesture was eloquent of helplessness and protest.

"What could I do, Mario *mio*? What message could I send? I did not know he was coming till he was here; I did not know he was going till he was gone, or at least at the point of starting; and since then, not a moment of rest for any of us! Oh, these servants from the city!" He drew a deep sigh, casting up eyes and hands.

"My uncle," said Don Mario, gently, "I wish to see the Signora Principessa."

Don Gennaro stared at him. "You are jesting, Mario."

"Not at all."

"But it is impossible."

"By no means. You can easily make an excuse to appear in her presence. I shall be close behind you, and through the open door

shall look in for a little moment. You owe me that much, I fancy."

Don Gennaro knew his nephew, and the uselessness of further protest. The two men left the room, the elder carrying a lantern. They ascended steps, crossed an open *loggia*, followed one passage after another.

"You could house twenty men in one wing of this old place, and the masters know nothing about it," remarked Don Mario in the pleased, reflective tone of one who makes an interesting discovery, adding significantly :

"Is it not true, uncle ?"

Don Gennaro, hurrying on, made no answer.

Outside the door of the Princess's apartments he paused.

"How can I go in when she has not sent for me?" he whispered, casting anxious glances down the long corridor, but seeing no one.

Don Mario took the lantern from his shaking hand, and placed it on a seat near by. Then going close to his uncle he stretched out a remarkably long arm and opened the door wide.

The great fire had burned down. Some logs still flamed, illumining a dim space

beyond the hearth, and in it the lofty carved chair. Their light shone redly on Valeria's hair and on her sleeping face.

Don Mario was prompt in action. He left his dismayed uncle's side, and stepped forward on tiptoe, a grotesque figure. He went close up to the little Princess and looked down at her, amazed and admiring.

"What a dainty little piece of waxwork!" he said to himself. "Only a brute of a husband would have had the heart to send her away from him. *Per Santo Diavolo*, that old fellow is an imbecile! 'A brave woman,' he said, and I imagined her some stately dame. See her tiny feet! I could hold both of them in one hand. I could — ah!"

Suddenly, without a flutter of the lids to warn him, the little Princess had opened her eyes. Before she drew another breath he was backing noiselessly into the shadow.

Valeria passed her hands over her eyes. She sat upright.

"Someone is there," she called; "who is it?"

Her high, clear tones reached the old steward's ears and he came forward trembling.

"I believed that your Excellency said you would like to speak with me this evening, so I ventured to present myself. I knocked, but you did not hear me."

"There is no one with you?"

"No one, your Excellency; Donato is not in the corridor."

"I am not speaking of Donato. I saw a face," involuntarily she lowered her voice, "a repulsive face, like a negro's, only very white."

Don Gennaro bowed, as if assenting to some obvious remark.

"He does not hear," said Valeria; then, speaking louder, "the door is ajar, be so good as to shut it."

The old man slowly obeyed. Before closing the door he opened it wider, and to his infinite relief felt someone brush past him.

The little Princess had left her chair. A bell stood on a table not far off, and she rang it sharply.

"Did I really see a face," she wondered, "or was I dreaming?"

Marietta entered with lighted candles. Valeria told the old steward to be seated.

Meanwhile Don Mario, carrying the lantern, which sent strange wavering gleams of light across the wide stretching darkness, made his retreat down the corridor, cursing as he went.

CHAPTER XI

BEFORE the spring had done blossoming, news from the outer world reached Valeria. She heard how Don Felice and Charnley had "met" somewhere on the coast, with the result that the former was seriously though not dangerously wounded. This, according to the informant (a convent friend of Valeria's), was not the only misfortune that had befallen him.

"When Decilis returned here," the lady wrote, "he went next morning to see the Elisei. No sooner were they alone together than she frankly told him that though you had been no friend of hers, and whatever your conduct might have been, she considered his treatment of you disgraceful, and an outrage on every woman in Rome. This being the case he could remain her friend no longer. There are people who laugh at her great scene

and say 'look for the other man and you will find him,' but others are credulous enough to think that she showed magnanimity and greatness of soul. Deciliš smiles and says nothing. I say she found a convenient way of ending a connection which had long been a burden to both parties, and yet of raising instead of lowering her own reputation in the process."

Perhaps because the little Princess wrote few letters herself and in them dwelt little on her private affairs and made light of her present position, the days when Donato brought back letters from Casaluccio came at ever lengthening intervals.

Neighbours of her own rank she had none. Sometimes she ordered her carriage and drove in state to the little town. But in Casaluccio, where there were now no Jacobins, people looked at her with unfriendly eyes, remembering her husband's supposed politics.

The San Cataldesi soon grew used to her presence among them, or rather above them. Don Stefano had assured them that she liked the French no better than they did; Don Stefano was her friend, and that was enough for them. He was also her almoner, and

through him they learnt that her purse was wide and her heart kind. Since the season following her coming was a good and fruitful one they even began to believe that she had brought the village good luck. Don Mario Vierci, hearing of this notion, ridiculed it contemptuously; but sneer as he might, he could no more deny the Signora Principessa's charity than he could deny her beauty.

Under her own roof Valeria could count a few friends.

There was Donato, the Roman valet who endured exile cheerfully for her sake; there was Zena, the maid whom Don Stefano had chosen for her, a dark-skinned country girl from a village which had once been a Saracen Colony, with a grave, still face which was Eastern rather than Southern, and severely beautiful; and there was the old steward, Don Gennaro. His timid caution, which seemed to imply a continual sense of ever present danger, was not proof against Valeria's innocent wiles. It amused her to flatter him gently and to draw him by sympathetic patience from the shelter of his instinctive distrust.

She had no such success where his niece was concerned.

Teresa Vierci, a handsome, restless-eyed woman, seemed possessed of a caution rivaling that of her husband's family. She belonged to the silent, not the loquacious Southern type, and since she was not in any way called upon to render service to Donna Valeria, it was easy for her to avoid her entirely.

The only human being whom Valeria could treat as an equal, with whom she could speak freely, to whom she could confide her recurrent outbreaks of impatience and rebellion, was her friend and spiritual director, Don Stefano Petrella.

This austere man, this fierce defender of the faiths, religious and political, in which he fiercely believed, had, like many another fanatic, a kind and gentle heart. And he had the rarer gift of a sympathetic imagination. He would listen patiently to Valeria's bitter railing against the loneliness and monotony of her life, he who had always been lonely and had spent his life in close contact with the monotony of daily toil. When she cried to

him, "Shall I spend all my days here? or all my young days which are the only ones worth having?" he would answer confidently, "The future is in God's hands; but I do not believe that sacrifice will be demanded of you." And yet she knew that in his eyes God had saved her out of a corrupt society and an evil city, thereby showing mercy on her.

Perhaps the strongest tie between them was the passionate interest both gave to public events. Never had Valeria cared so much to know how the world went, as since she had been, as it were, thrust out of it. It was so partly from her valiant determination not to sink into indifference and apathy, partly because she never knew that a turn of the wheel might not mean her own deliverance. And truly the wheel turned in a bewildering manner. Even San Cataldo, it seemed, would never be able to dream itself back into the middle ages again.

England's declaration of war against France; her sending of seven thousand men to Malta to protect Naples; Austerlitz and the flight of the King and Queen to Sicily; the coming of Joseph Bonaparte into his kingdom — in-

vasion and war once more! here were things for Valeria and Don Stefano to talk of by the guard room fire in winter or up on the battlement terrace in the long hot summer evenings! But when one is young talking gives little satisfaction if action is wholly denied one; and much as he did for her it was not Don Stefano who saved the little Princess from despair.

A July evening radiant and glowing. A breeze blew down the valley, bringing with it a little freshness from the far-off sea. The little Princess felt its cooling breath, stretched herself and sat upright.

She had been resting like an odalisque upon cushions spread at the eastern end of the terrace, where the glare of sunshine never came save for an hour or two in the morning. Though called a terrace, this was rather a narrow stone-paved walk, following the curve of the battlements, where a sentinel might pace, and from one end face the western sky and look out over the whole valley and the road to Casaluccio, stretching white and narrow between the green vineyards and grey

olive orchards, and from the other look down into the deep cleft where the *fumare* foamed in springtime, and where beyond the dusty, stony watercourse rose the sheer mountain-side. There was a wide terrace sheltered by the castle walls. Valeria preferred this eyrie among the battlements, and would pace up and down it by the hour, or lean on the wide stone parapet watching the blue shadow of some drifting cloud darken the mountains.

The little Princess had entered upon the fifth year of her captivity. She was still so young that the years developed her beauty instead of withering it. She had grown thinner, and her blue eyes, graver than of old, had acquired the absent expression, at once watchful and abstracted, of eyes accustomed to dwell on wide horizons. The fierce Apulian sun had tanned her face and hands and wrists to a clear pale brown.

She was listening. Her quick ears had caught the tread of ascending feet on the narrow stone staircase that led to her resting-place.

"Zena I never hear," she thought; "can it be Don Gennaro?"

A low-browed door opened, and a tall black-clad figure stepped out over its threshold. It was not Don Gennaro's, that bent angular figure, and loose-jointed drifting walk.

Valeria started to her feet with a cry of amazement and joy.

Weeks had passed since she last saw Don Stefano. In the spring he had once more led his flock to battle in defence of a tottering throne and an invaded country. He and they had shared in the disastrous defeat of Campo Tenese, since when he had been in hiding, or tramping the country-side trying to fan the dying flame of insurrection.

This was a very different meeting from their first on that wild February evening four years and more ago. She knelt down hurriedly before him, and he murmured a blessing over her bent head. Then they stood looking at one another in that silence which is more uniting than speech.

The priest's face was as sun-browned and seamed with lines as that of a peasant who lives toiling in the fields but just now it had none of the peasant's brooding passivity. His lips trembled, and the red spark that some-

times lurked in those strange brown eyes of his was alight and shining.

“Is it good news?”

“Great news, wonderful news!” he answered. “News to make an old man young again! Some days ago the English landed five thousand soldiers at S. Eufemia. They called upon the people to join them, and the people, faint-hearted, hung back. If what they wanted was a sign from heaven, God and San Michele have sent it! The English learnt that Regnier’s Corps were encamped on the wooded hillside above the plain; a strong position with the Amato along his front. They advanced by the sea’s edge and offered battle. Had the French stayed where they were no one could have touched them; but no, they saw the English were badly posted, and they themselves had just received reinforcements. They were seven thousand strong; they had cavalry and their enemy had none. They descended into the plain. Their left advanced steadily to the attack, taking cover behind the brushwood, holding on under a heavy fire, till they crossed bayonets with the English right. Did those brave islanders waver? No; it was

the French who turned and fled. Vainly the right wing tried to recover the day. Just at the most dangerous moment, just as the French cavalry were trying to turn the English left, another English regiment, fresh, for they had only lately landed, came up and sent them to the right-about. Regnier had nothing for it but to retreat. Hundreds of his men, they tell me, are dead on the field, thousands were taken prisoners. Think what such a victory means at such a time! Only the cowards will hang back now. We shall join hands with the English and attack along the whole line of the coast."

"I am glad I had an English mother," said the little Princess. "And Gaeta still holds out?"

Don Stefano's face changed. "Provided the German prince holds out," he answered, "all will be well."


Turning, they walked slowly toward the battlements. Valeria was thinking of Gilbert Charnley. She pictured him commanding one of those gallant English regiments against whose steady line the French had charged in vain. She knew he would have given years

of his life to share in the glory of that day. But he was not there, she told herself; he had learnt to hate Italy for her sake.

Someone spoke behind her. "Good day, Eccellenza."

She started and turned. A newcomer had stepped on to the terrace, and was bowing low before her. It was Mario Vierci, the old steward's nephew.

Don Mario no longer bore the least resemblance to a quiet respectable landowner of Casaluccio. He was the leader of a guerilla troop which the enemy called a band of brigands. He wore the dress of a mountaineer, the black velvet coat thick with silver buttons, the broad, brown, nail-studded leather belt. On his breast hung a small black cross and a figure of the Madonna worked in crimson silk, and below them lurked the embossed butts of a pair of pistols and the handle of a long curved hunting-knife. He held in his right hand a high-crowned, pointed, drab-coloured hat, carrying a black feather that swept the ground. The savage picturesqueness of such a dress, combined with his pale hairless face and jaunty self-possession, suggested an actor



playing a congenial part, and this very suggestion of fantastic pretence was the most sinister thing about him.

The word "mountebank" trembled behind Valeria's disdainful lips. Yet her scorn had a touch of fear in it. She looked from him to Don Stefano. The two men were standing side by side. Their figures showed black against the radiant western sky, and cast long shadows across the worn stone pavement at their feet.

To Valeria's eyes one — the priest — was the embodiment of all war's claim to glory — its fearlessness, its devotion and self-sacrifice; and the other of all its lowest vileness, massacre, rapine, treachery, and outrage. She hated to think that the highest was bound to the lowest, even as the two men were one in aim, and comrades fighting for one cause.

Don Mario asked pardon for venturing thus unannounced into her presence. His time was short, he said, and he had a favour to ask of her. Might he spend the night in the castle with his esteemed relations, whom he had for long been unable to visit?

Valeria forced herself to reply graciously:

"Assuredly you have my permission. It is my wish that you should visit them whenever it suits you."

No sooner were the words spoken than she regretted them. She had disliked Don Mario from the day long ago when she had looked in his face and recognised it. She had never forgotten the insolent trick he had played her by following his uncle into the room where she sat asleep, and stealing away unchallenged. And her regret did not spring only from personal aversion; she was uneasy at the thought that she had perhaps no right to shelter under her roof one whom the Prince would consider a rebel and a brigand. But the words once spoken could not be withdrawn, and if Don Mario was a rebel, so also was Stefano Petrella.

"You start to-morrow?" she asked, turning to the latter.

"To-morrow at daybreak," Don Stefano answered; "as it is we shall be late-comers. There is much to be done, and few hours remain in which to do it. Mario, we must take leave of the Signora Principessa."

Sorely against her will Valeria recognised

that her parting from her friend and benefactor must take place in Don Mario's presence, and the words of gratitude and affection which rose to her lips remain unspoken, perhaps for ever. Even her last sight of him was marred by the fact that Don Mario, following close behind him, turned with a smile on his white face to make yet another elaborate salutation.

CHAPTER XII

BELOW that ledge on the mountain-side where San Cataldo has managed to take root, the rocks shelve steeply down, cropping out through patches of thin soil till they are hidden by the chestnut woods.

In the heart of the chestnut woods, whose green was glowing to vivid gold under the first breath of autumn, two boys were stretched enjoying luxurious ease. Far above the fierce sun beat pitilessly on arid limestone and white roadway; here, where the trees spread their shielding branches, their broad vigorous leaves, lay verdant shadow and peace.

The boys wore the usual dress of the mountaineer, dark blue caps, shabby velvet-reen jackets, and close-fitting knee breeches. The elder might be seventeen; a slight slip of a lad with a dark clear-cut profile and a proud carriage of his small shaggy black head. His

feet and legs were bare and deeply sunburnt, but beside him lay his thick woollen stockings, and presently he began to draw them on, talking meanwhile in an eager monotone :

“And at last we all went down the steps that led into the cavern. It was not a cavern such as may be seen in the mountains up here, but a wonderful deep place leading away into the bowels of the earth, and you could not see the end of it for the clouds of incense. And there were holy pictures painted on the walls, and the Holy Madonna above the high altar, and the crowd was so thick that at first we could not get anywhere near her. And the people all cried out and wept, and struck the ground with their foreheads. I also bowed down and beat my forehead on the ground, and when I looked up I saw stars of fire in a mist, and above them the Holy Madonna, and I—”

He stopped short, checked by a sudden movement from his companion. The latter, who had been lying at full length with his head resting on his folded arms, had turned, raising himself on one elbow. His left hand made a quick imperious gesture.

"Listen!" he said, shaking back the shock of reddish brown hair which fell over his forehead, almost hiding his childish face, so that he might the better hear a distant sound. Faint at first, it became the beat of horses' hoofs approaching at a trot over an iron-hard road.

"It may be Mario or one of his men," said the bigger lad.

"We must know," answered the other; "run."

Both took to their heels, but the elder was soon far ahead, slipping in and out between the branches, and springing over stony places with a wild animal's lithe agility. He broke through the edge of the wood and doubling to the right climbed a mound, on the rocky summit of which he dropped down, curling himself into a crevice. By raising himself slightly he could peer down between the rocks that hid him, and might have dropped a stone into the road below, that one dusty white ribbon of a road that runs from Casaluccio to San Cataldo.

He took great care, however, to disturb no stones, and did not stir till he knew the

horsemen to be close beneath him. There were two horsemen, riding half a dozen yards apart. The foremost reined in his mount, turned in his saddle, and beckoned his companion.

The boy above them drew a quick dismayed breath. "Strangers!" he thought; "what the devil does that mean?"

Meanwhile the smaller boy had reached the edge of the chestnut wood and paused there, leaning against a tree trunk. He moved impatiently, pulling at a loose piece of bark. Something seemed to please him, for he laughed softly; he drew a knife from his belt, tried its point, and began, clumsily enough, to scratch what was meant for a letter. He became so engrossed in this occupation that he did not catch the quick rustle of flying feet, and his friend was close at his elbow before he started and turned.

The dark-faced boy was panting hard.

"Strangers," he gasped; "a gentleman and his servant—shabbily dressed, though. I should not have known it was a servant if the master had not called him to take a stone out of his mare's shoe."

"It is, perhaps, Don Niccolò Prinetti," said the younger boy, quickly.

"Is Don Niccolò young and handsome? and does he speak like a prince? Their horses were very tired," he went on, when his companion had made a negative gesture; "they were good horses, and not used to our roads. Evidently they are bound for the castle."

"Whoever they may be," cried the other, with sudden energy, "we must be moving, and quickly."

And at that the boys ran. Having reached the road, they crossed it, glancing anxiously to right and left, kept alongside it a little way, then sped up a narrow footpath that climbed the mountain-side. Where boulders jutted out that could not be clambered over, it found an ingenious way round them. Its windings were hardly visible to untrained eyes, but the boys followed them with the sureness of long familiarity and the ease of practised mountaineers. This time the smaller boy kept close at the other's heels.

The gentleman and his servant pursued a longer and less precipitous way to San Ca-

taldo. No village street lay between them and their destination. Here and there the rough roof and whitewashed walls of a cottage showed themselves, perching capriciously above or below the steep road, and a few olives raised their grey-green heads, or a fig stretched its fantastic branches where you would have thought no tree could grow. At this early evening hour the little homesteads were almost deserted, every able-bodied man, woman, or child being far away at work in the fields and vineyards below the chestnut woods. Shade there was none, and the perspiring servant sighed and swore, softly, lest his master should hear him.


Both paused awhile before the great gate of the castle, and the master stared up critically at the massive bastions and gate-house, and at the ancient gates, standing wide open, and the rough grass growing close to their threshold. Then he rode through them and on down the broad, flagged passage between high walls, and dismounted at the door leading into the courtyard. The nearest wing of the castle towered above him, grim and silent. No face looked out from the narrow windows, set at

long intervals, and heavily barred. The gentleman eyed them, smiling. "The old nest does not look as if it had a mistress," he thought. "For that matter, it may have none; who knows?"

He tried the nearest door and found it open, threw the reins to his servant, and told him to knock and call till someone answered. He himself crossed the court and disappeared up that vaulted stairway which led to the great gallery and the state apartments. The corridor was quite devoid of human interest. He pushed open the carved doors of one or two rooms, only to retreat in disgust at the close-shuttered desolation within. Finally he tried a door at one end of the corridor, and found it locked.

No sound within responded to his first knock. His second or third brought the grating of a key, and one side swung back a few inches. In the narrow opening there was a flash of colour, a peasant girl's scarlet bodice, above which eyes black and piercing met his gaze with a defiant, eager steadiness.

"The Signora Principessa?" he said inquiringly.



“The Signora Principessa bids me ask you your name and business.”

The stranger smiled. “And if I refuse information on either point?”

The girl drew back instantly, but, quick as she was, the man was quicker. He thrust the door back upon her, yet without undue violence. “These are queer manners,” he said, passing her. “And who are you, pray? Her Excellency’s maid?”

Indignation kept the girl silent. His eyes rested on her scarlet, gold-embroidered bodice, worn with a full, dark-coloured skirt.

“You are not of San Cataldo?” he remarked.

“I am Zenobia Tirico, of Castel Mauro,” answered the girl, proudly, “and if I had had the sense to step outside the door, instead of trying to shut it, you would not have forced your way in here.”

The stranger laughed. “I am your master,” he said. “I do what I please in my own house.”

“His Excellency Prince Decilis is in Rome.” Zenobia Tirico spoke slowly, and her brown face paled a little.

“On the contrary, my dear, he is here, hot,

dusty, and in a bad temper. Go and tell the Princess — ah, there she is! She has come to see what keeps you.”

Having tranquilly finished his sentence, Don Felice went to meet his wife.

That voice, which she could never forget, had reached Valeria through a half-open door. Her first strong emotion had come and gone, or, rather, she had mastered it.

“You wished to take me literally by surprise?” she said with an odd, almost spontaneous gaiety. “Did you think I should shut the gates against you?”

She spoke in French, and the Prince, having ceremoniously kissed her hands, answered in the same language, “On the contrary, I felt sure you must be expecting me, and as to the gates, they should certainly be kept shut in these days, when the country-side is swarming with brigands.”

“They are shut at sunset, as usual,” answered Valeria. “You are indeed wrong if you think that I expected you. I never supposed you would — that you would run the risk of coming. Whom have you brought with you?”

“Marchi, my valet. Did you think I should

ask for an escort in Casaluccio? I doubt if I should have found one; my property has a bad reputation."

The little Princess turned to Zena.

"Go down to Don Gennaro, and tell him that a gentleman, a friend of mine, has come to visit me, and will have supper and spend the night here. Do not let anyone suspect who the gentleman is. Tell him to look to the servant and the horses and then come to me."

Don Felice's eyes followed Zena as she left the room.

"You have a handsome Saracen savage for your maid," he said; "but why should she preserve this mystery? By this time my man must have effected an entrance, and certainly has not concealed my identity."

In old days Valeria's pride would have been stung by the calm irony with which he indicated the childishness of her precaution. Just now she scarcely noticed it. She was thinking hard.

"You are right," she said slowly, "and in any case it would have been useless to attempt it."

“Why is the corridor empty?” her husband asked. “Have you no men-servants?”

The little Princess looked at him without speaking. He repeated his question impatiently.

“I had Donato,” she answered at last; “he was a good, faithful servant. I sent him to Casaluccio a month ago, and he was stabbed, murdered on the outskirts of the town. I hope one day to avenge his death, but this is not a time for obtaining justice.”

“It will be soon, and then all these gentry who call themselves Royalists will get their deserts; but we will discuss public affairs another time. What other men have you here?”

“Old Matteo and the boy who helps him in the kitchen, the coachman, and one groom. There is also the gardener and his grandson, one seventy and the other seven, and there is your steward, Gennaro Vierci.”

“Who must be in his dotage. Why do you keep a household of old men and boys at such a time as this?”

“I am safe,” said Valeria, proudly. “Believe me, I am safe. No brigands, if any came here,

would touch me. My people—your people would protect me.”

“The excellent, peaceable inhabitants of San Cataldo, who belong to a band led by a fellow who is said to be twice a mongrel, in that he is one-fourth negro and half a devil? Even the old priest, I hear, has developed a taste for bloodshed. But for my constitutional inertia I should have put a stop to this pretty state of things long ago. Why did not you write and tell me of it?”

“I wrote to you that you need not have the slightest anxiety on my account. I am not here to play the political spy for you.”

The Prince raised his eyebrows. “I am under the impression that I have left you considerable liberty. Ah, here comes that aged one!”

With a hasty, shuffling step the old steward crossed the room.

His eyes, tragic and appealing, sought those of his mistress for one moment. Decilis saw the glance which passed between them and watched Don Gennaro curiously while listening to his stammered welcome.

“Thank you,” he answered, “my health

was never better. I have even enjoyed riding over execrable roads in a part of the country where travelling is supposed to be dangerous. But I am tired and hungry."

"You will conduct the Signore Principe to his apartments," said Valeria, "and tell Matteo to let us dine as soon as possible." Her eyes added, "Then come back quickly!" She knew Don Gennaro would understand the mute command.

The Prince and Princess dined in an inner room opening out of that great hall, once a guard-room for Norman men-at-arms, where it was still her habit to sit by the blazing logs in winter-time. Marchi, the valet, waited upon them, and made intimate conversation impossible.

Decilis spoke from time to time. He said that his own interest had made it necessary that he should visit the Neapolitan Court.

"You know, or perhaps you do not know, that by the new laws much property is to be taken from us nobles, and given — restored as they call it — to the people. That is a matter in which personal influence may do a good deal, as you will understand."

"Certainly," said Valeria, but she was thinking of something else. How quickly the daylight was fading! Or was it only that since the windows looked east toward the mountain-side, the deep shadow without made a premature twilight round them?

The Prince was watching her. For the first time for very long she was dressed as if for a Roman evening. She wore a pale green gauze dress striped with silver, a sheathlike garment, at once flowing and scanty, after the pseudo-classic fashion of the day.

"Why do you go out so much in the sun?" he asked abruptly. Instinctively she raised her hands to her throat.

"The tan is deep," he said smiling, "no pearl powder will hide it. It would have an odd look in society."

Marchi had left the room after lighting the candles on the dinner-table.

"Society counts for nothing here," returned Valeria. "If in one sense I am a prisoner, in another I am free."

She had at that moment a curious sense of freedom. She knew herself to be delivered for ever from that atmosphere of fear in which

she had once lived and moved; the fear of angering him, of drawing upon herself his criticism or mockery, of alienating him yet further without knowing why. It was over now. He was here, his eyes rested on her, yet she felt its bondage no more.

"You consider yourself so entirely free?" the Prince asked. "That explains what I hear of you."


"What do you hear of me?" Her clear serene eyes met his.

"I hear you are hand in glove with old Petrella, who will be hung outside his own church door when the French come to San Cataldo."

"He is indeed my friend. You have been rightly informed. But I do not think the French will ever hang him. He may be dead already, at least I do not know if his wounds and his sorrows have not killed him."

"Heart-broken, I presume, at the failure of the English invasion? Truly he is a distinguished person, the equal of Pane del Grano and the Diavolo Nero."

"It would be as just to call the Cardinal their equal. They are malefactors, and Don



Stefano Petrella is an honourable man. And he is the best man I have ever known. Would to God he were here now, and then I should feel sure of your safety !”

“I understand. You would beg him to exert his great influence on my behalf. I do not fancy that I am in any danger, but that is another question. Is Mario Vierci also an honoured friend of yours? I have heard that he boasts of your good-will toward him.”

The little Princess laughed and shivered at the same moment. “Your informers will tell you next that I lead the *Massé*¹ myself in person.”

Decilis was growing angry. Every answer she gave back fanned a flame in him which burnt the fiercer because it found no outlet. He was more and more conscious of a change in her. Of old it had been so easy to read her every change of mood in her transparent face, so easy to make her childlike eyes flash defiance or look away dulled by blank disappointment. To-night her eyes told him nothing, except that he had lost his power over her. She spoke as if he could neither influence her

¹ Guerilla bands.

actions nor her fate. Well, he would make her own herself mistaken.

"I see that I did well to come," he said, "and should have come sooner. This is no place now for you or any woman. You must be aware that if the *canaille* have rallied round the ex-king Ferdinand, the nobles have rallied round King Joseph. As I have said, my interests take me to Naples. We will live in Naples, at any rate for the present."

Hitherto their talk had been thrust and parry, but he had touched her at last. She turned white, and he could see her lips tremble.

"Go back to the old life?" she said. Then, after a brief silence, "And if I refuse?"

"You would hardly be so foolish. This must be death in life."

"I have grown used to it," she answered gently.

"But after all, if I am willing to overlook the past?"

Her eyes met his. "And if I am not willing, if, as I have said, I refuse?"

"I must understand first *what* you refuse."

"To overlook the past, Felice, to go back to the old life; to leave this place, in short."

"This castle is mine, I believe, and old Gennaro would obey my orders."

"I am not so sure of that."

His anger flamed at last.

"I quite appreciate your reasons for wishing to remain. Has he found his way here already, or was he, perhaps, an expected guest?"

"Ah!" said Valeria, "now you are talking in riddles. Whom am I expecting?"

"The excellent Captain Charnley."

Valeria drew a quick breath.

"Is he in Italy? I did not know it," she said.

"As you like," said Decilis, "as you like, but understand one thing! When I leave San Cataldo you will—" he stopped short. "What is that?" he exclaimed; "don't you hear it?"

Above the faint stir in the next room, to which he was listening, rose a smothered choking cry.

Valeria sprang to her feet. "Zena!" she called, "Zena!"

No voice answered, only the trampling of heavy feet. The double doors were thrown

open and half a dozen men trooped into the room. All were armed to the teeth, and all but one carried carbines. All had darkly sunburnt faces, which made that of their leader look the whiter by force of contrast.


Don Mario Vierci swaggered forward, while his men, standing back, spread into line before the doors. The light of the candles burning on the dinner-table caught the silver buttons of his jacket, and the chain and whistle hanging among crosses and medals on his breast. It glittered in his implacable eyes, and on the barrel of the pistol, with which he deliberately covered Decilis.

Valeria started forward so that her slim gaily-clad body came between it and the Prince, and so stood facing him. Decilis was beside her in an instant.

"Mario Vierci," he said, with cool contempt, "what is the meaning of this melodrama?"

Don Mario's lips were drawn back in a fixed smile.

"Signore Principe," he said, "having heard of your arrival in this house of yours, I have come to inquire how long you propose remaining among us?"



Decilis looked him over from the tall black feather in his sugar-loaf hat to his spurred heels.

"I answer no questions from a man who comes into my wife's presence without uncovering."

Two or three of Don Mario's men raised their hands hastily and took their hats off.

"I see there are a few honest peasants among you," said the Prince, eying them for a moment, "and — one very impudent rogue."

Don Mario was still smiling. "Donna Valeria is no doubt grateful to you," he answered, "most grateful for your chivalrous protection; she has had to do without it for a considerable time. You came here once, Signore Principe, and slipped through my fingers. I thought you might elude me a second time, which must be my excuse for disturbing a newly reunited pair. I intend to keep you here — as a hostage — until such time as it shall be profitable to release you. Will you give me your word of honour that you will make no attempt to leave the castle?"

Don Felice laughed. "You hound! I propose to leave this place without asking your permission."

Don Mario turned to the little Princess, "I take you to witness, Eccellenza, that we have no choice but to bestow him in safe keeping."

A flame shone in Valeria's tragic bewildered eyes: "I will witness that you are a villain and a traitor," she said. "For your own sake, think well before you do this thing."

"Eccellenza, I never walk backwards; I make up my mind and go straight on. As for discourteous words, I merely — remember them."

Valeria turned to the men. "You will do this vile thing?"

Silence answered her, till a rough voice said hurriedly, "The Signora Principessa knows that we would not touch one hair of her head."

"The more so," put in Don Mario, "that no one has asked you to do so. Don Felice, will you come with us quietly, or must we use force?"

The little Princess stood still and silent. She had but one thought that came and went like a stabbing pain. Could he think that she had betrayed him?

Furtively, so that no one might see the

action, Decilis covered her left hand with his right and held it for an instant.

"One day," he said, speaking to Don Mario, "one day you will wish that you could walk backwards, one day when you come to the gallows, or a wall with your grave at your feet."

Then, hardly glancing at Valeria, he said, "*Au revoir*, Princesse."

"*A rivederla*, Signora Principessa," said Don Mario, like a mocking echo.

The little Princess sprang forward again. "Where are you taking him? I will know!" she demanded. It was no entreaty, but a strange, fierce whisper.

Don Mario paused: "He will be under your own roof, Eccellenza, though not in his own chamber, as he might have been had he shown a little sense. But so far as I know he has never shown any. March, you others!"

Prince Decilis left the room followed by his captor, and the other men jostled each other in their hurry to get through the doorway. One or two wished the little Princess good night. They had expected a very different reception, and being of San Cataldo felt sur-


prised and somewhat injured. Had they not always been told that the Prince had served his wife abominably? And yet, such being the inconsistency of woman, she had been ready to fly at them on his behalf! But perhaps after all it was nothing but a clever piece of acting.

Through the door they had left open behind them dashed a woman, panting, fierce-eyed, and dishevelled; a beautiful fury. She came to Valeria and seized her by both hands.

"Oh, the black-blooded devil!" she panted. "I would have got my knife into him as he came back; by San Michele it should have cut his heart in pieces, but he left a man to hold me, and he gripped me fast. I was a fool and a beast to sit there with my back to the door. Holy Madonna! do not look at me like that!"

"Will they kill him soon?" asked Valeria, in a whisper. "Is there a trap-door that gives way under your tread, and you fall and are dashed to pieces?"

"No, no," Zena answered, "they will not kill him; what use would he be to them



dead? Mario kills men to serve his own ends, as he killed Donato."

"Yes, he killed Donato," said the little Princess shuddering. "He thought I had too many friends. Who sent him word that the Prince was here? I will avenge that if I live."

"A woman, Eccellenza; that wretch Teresa Vierci. She is his slave, his thing, and has always been his spy here. Eccellenza, he will come back presently. I implore you, do not anger him further!"

"I at least am safe, as long as Don Stefano lives. What has become of the Prince's valet?"

"Dead, Eccellenza, that villain who held me said so. He said, 'Take care, or I will slit your throat as Beppo slit that of the fine fellow downstairs.'"

Valeria shivered. "And the others," she said, "are they also his spies? Is there not one who will be faithful and help me?"

"Eccellenza, as long as they know you are in no danger—what is your husband to them? A stranger, a Roman, the Frenchmen's friend. They do not know him enough to fear him, and he is a prisoner. They know

Don Mario, who will tell them that he is in reality here by your command — and it is true that you gave him leave to come. They will believe it, and all the country-side will believe it.”

So they talked on, reckoning the heavy odds against them, until voices in the anteroom, where a sentinel had been left on guard, warned them that their enemy was near. A few moments later Don Mario entered.

The little Princess was sitting in that high carved arm-chair in which she had dozed by the dying fire one spring evening long ago. Zena had set the candles on a cabinet behind her, so that her face was in deep shadow.

This time Don Mario had come bareheaded.

“Send that girl away, Eccellenza,” he said.
“I must speak with you alone.”

Valeria made a gesture of acquiescence, and Zena withdrew into the inner room. The girl did not dare to leave the door ajar, but by pressing her ear against it she could at least be certain to hear a cry.

“The French are at Altamura,” said Don Mario. “Did your husband tell you so?”

“No.”

A knife such as the peasants used, lay hidden under the folds of her dress. She pressed her fingers on its handle and spoke again.

"Altamura is not far off. And so you have taken my husband prisoner, meaning to keep him as a hostage till the day when you make terms for yourself?"

"That is my intention, Eccellenza, and only you can make me change it."

Valeria held her breath. Was it possible that he spoke seriously, or did he merely deride her?

"For four years or more," pursued Don Mario, "has the Signore Principe left you here a prisoner, with no one to speak to save an old crack-brained priest. What other wrongs he has done you, you know best. And then there is another matter. A foreign gentleman, who was once very much your friend, is now in Italy. I speak of the Signore Gilberto Charnley. The Signora Principessa has surely not forgotten him?"

"Certainly your spies serve you well," said Valeria, with contempt.

"Women will always serve one well, Sig-

nora Principessa, provided one never over-ruled them. But you did wisely to dismiss the maid called Marietta. To speak once more to Signore Charnley. He was with his regiment at Maida. Since then he has been sent with a handful of Neapolitan horse to keep in touch with us, and report on the state of the country. Fate has put everything into our own hands. Most illustrious one, you need only to say the word and you are a woman, free, rich, and powerful."

For a long minute the little Princess was silent. Then she stretched out her hand.

"Give me your knife," she said.

"Corpo di Bacco, not I!" said Don Mario, drawing back a step.

"Then take it yourself, and gash me with it."

Don Mario's face changed and darkened. He took her hand in his, and drawing his knife passed its point lightly over her wrist. It made a mere scratch and yet drew blood.

Valeria looked down at the small red wound. "I swear by my blood," she said, "I

would rather you stabbed me to the heart than that you hurt one hair of my husband's head, and that as you do to him so will I assuredly do to you."

Don Mario broke into harsh laughter.

"Thank you for your frankness, Signora Principessa. You play with your cards on the table. And so if the English capitano comes this way — which is not likely — I am not to greet him from you?"

The little Princess either did not hear, or disdained to answer his question.

"And how will you treat me?" she said. "Shut me up in a dungeon and make Teresa Vierci my gaoler?"

Don Mario made a protesting gesture. "God forbid! Eccellenza, you will be as free as air — in your own apartments and inside the walls of your garden. Upon the battlements? No, I must set a watch there. Only remember one thing. It is not for nothing that I have spent some nights here lately. I know every turn of the old robber hold, every subterranean passage, above all every outlet. All will be watched and any messenger you send will meet a knife-point — so."

He pointed his knife at his own heart before resheathing it.


"And there is another thing you will be pleased to consider. If the Prince escapes, either with or without your connivance, I will kill you, wherever you may be."

"Threatened men live long," said Valeria.

"*Per Santo Diavolo*, old Stefano was right! You are a brave woman. Why did not God make me a Prince?"

"You would still have been a villain," Valeria answered. "Do not let me keep you any longer."

When he had left her she sat long with her useless knife in her hand. Over and over again she asked herself the same questions. Could a message from her reach Gilbert Charnley? He was a gentleman. As such would he defend her from brigands who chanced to be his own allies? He would, undoubtedly. Had not an English officer protected, not long ago, the house of Don Giovanni Serlupo when it was attacked by the *Massé*? And how far would he protect Felice Decilis, his personal enemy?



CHAPTER XIII

NEVER was a prisoner worse prepared for the patient endurance of captivity than Felice, Prince Decilis.

To begin with, there was the goading knowledge, persistent as a hungry mosquito, that he had only his own folly to thank for the position—at once awkward, ridiculous, and dangerous—in which he found himself. Travelling in the South at all times had its risks, and now when the very semblance of law and order had vanished, and the French were retaking one by one the ports from which the English and the insurgents had lately driven them, it meant the constant presence of peril. But the Prince, through facing such peril with impunity, had lightly despised it. He had overlooked the simple precaution of telling some responsible person where he was going, so that that person

might, should he require it, come to his assistance. He had travelled strictly incognito, and that which had been his protection was now a strong card for his enemies. His disappearance would attract no attention, his death, even, might long be kept a secret, and entirely accounted for by a journey undertaken in such risky circumstances. He had given Don Mario every possible advantage, even to letting himself be made ridiculous in the eyes of Valeria.

For it was ridiculous to be a helpless prisoner under his own roof, while his own cook and his own stable boys were free to come and go. As for the Princess, she might entertain her English admirer in her own apartments, and he, her lord and master, would know nothing of it, buried alive between the enormous walls of one of the towers which a Norman liegeman of the great Count Roger built seven hundred odd years ago.

The Prince occupied a large half-circular room on the first story. Its vaulted ceiling, thick with cobwebs, was of stone; its floor, thick with dust, of stone likewise; its

windows mere slits and barred. It contained some odds and ends of furniture, but no bedstead; a mattress and bedclothes were spread on the floor. The door was low-browed and very narrow, and furnished, as he knew, with a massive outer lock and bars. This door had a fascination for him, not only because it stood between him and freedom. It was so grey and old and pitiless. The sap must have died out of it centuries since. It had grown grey and hard as the stone of its setting. Desperate hands of men and women must have beaten vainly against it.

Tired out, he slept through the first night of his captivity. He had slept lately in less comfortable beds.

Don Mario Vierci brought him his breakfast.

"How long do you mean to keep me here?" the Prince asked as he poured out his coffee. He spoke carelessly as if to make conversation.

"Till the French are a little nearer than Bari," replied Don Mario, "or till it becomes inconvenient."

"I heard that they had reached Altamura."

"A mere reconnaissance, Eccellenza, may end badly, and can give them no but a few prisoners. I hope, for your that it may not become inconvenient, would find the tower of some *masseria* in mountains less comfortable than this. Excellency's ancestors put their prisoners in the dungeons, incommodious places, only for low-born people."

His luncheon was brought him by a woman, at sight of whom his heart quickened. Here was a creature he might be able to influence. She was a handsome woman, no longer young, with a careworn face and the fierce furtive glance of a half-tamed animal.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Teresa Vierci."

"The wife of Mario?"

"His cousin's widow, Eccellenza."

"I remember," said the Prince; "I leave that you and your brats should be housed here. I believed that any Vierci would be faithful to me and my family, but you have served us for generations. Well, what can I do to prevent my thrusting you aside, or better

tying you down, and then getting out of this place?"

"There is an armed man at the foot of the little stairs, Eccellenza."

"So I supposed," said Don Felice. "Where is my servant? They might at least have let him wait on me."

The woman moved quickly toward the door, but the Prince caught her wrist.

"Answer," he said roughly. "Where is my servant?"

"He is dead," answered the woman. Decilis turned white.

"You shall pay for this, you and your children!"

"I know it, Eccellenza."

"Who did it?"

"I do not know; I know nothing, I was not there."

Torture would not have made her say more. Decilis read as much in her stubborn face, and let her go without another word.

The second night of his captivity was hot and breathless. Far off, thunder growled and muttered among the mountains. Sleep shunned him for hours, and came bringing

dreams in which Valeria, wearing a green dress striped with moonlight, played Clytemnestra to his Agamemnon. The storm heat of the day that followed was fierce even inside mediæval walls where no sun's rays could penetrate. He could not eat, and paced incessantly up and down, caged beast-wise.

All his meals were brought by Teresa Vierci, who, on seeing his untasted food, eyed him anxiously, and murmured that the dinner was very good. In his state of mind the words were enough to remind him that one person, at any rate, might desire his speedy death. But he called himself a coward to admit such a suspicion, and ate to prove his own courage to himself. When it grew quite dark he lay down, half dressed as he had been all day, upon his pallet bed, listened, expecting a storm which held aloof, and dropped asleep.

He woke suddenly, with the sense of a human presence near him. Keeping perfectly still, he opened his eyes a little. A dim light filled the room. A yard away from him a woman knelt on the stones. It was the little Princess. The light of a lantern set on the floor beside her shone on her bare neck

and the bright edges of her loosely curling hair, but left her face in shadow. He could hear her draw a long, sobbing breath.

"Valeria," he said softly.

The little Princess rose to her feet and turned away. He saw that she was wringing her hands together, and that her slight shoulders were shaken by a storm of sobs. He did not speak again till he was close beside her.

"Do they mean to kill me already," he said; "and have they sent you to tell me so?"

"No, no," cried Valeria; "he has gone, he has left the castle."

"Gone!" exclaimed Decilis. Then lowering his voice, "Be quick, tell me the truth, can I get away now, at once?"

"It is impossible," Valeria whispered.

Don Felice darted to the door and tore at it. It was barred on the outside as usual.

He went back to Valeria, panting.

"How did you come here?" he asked savagely. "You had their permission, then?"

"The man on guard at the foot of the stairs let himself be bribed. He will do this much for me, but he would kill you before you set foot in the passage."

Her heart was wrung with pity for him, her heart which she believed time had hardened till the old strange influence could no longer move it. All her resentment against his cruel injustice was swept away into the limbo of things forgotten. He was suffering, and she must stand by and see him suffer. Life had narrowed itself to this.

Decilis uttered an impatient exclamation and flung himself on a chair. She went to him with hands outstretched.

"You shall not stay here," she said. "I will save you, believe me, I will do it!"

Don Felice smiled faintly. His attitude toward her had always been critical, most of all when she outstepped the part he assigned to her, or, as he put it, forsook light comedy for tragedy. In other words, he resented any disturbance of his assumption that she was half a child and not to be taken seriously. The old feeling influenced him now.

"My dear," he said, "what can you do?" Then, with a sudden change of mood: "You shall not try to propitiate that devil Mario. I forbid your stooping to that; do you hear, I forbid it!"

"I would not do it," answered Valeria, "and it would be useless."

"Then do you expect the San Cataldesi to rescue me at your command?"

"No," said Valeria, sadly, "they will be told that I summoned Mario and his men for my protection, and they will believe it—and even if I could undeceive them they would do nothing openly against him."

"Excellent, faithful people! Have you any means of sending a message to Don Niccolò Prinetti? or the Syndic of Casaluccio?"

"If a messenger got clear of the house he would never reach the town in safety. And if such an attempt were made you would be dragged away to some hold in the mountains."

"Which would be unpleasant for me, at any rate. Excuse me if I fail to see whence my deliverance is coming."

The little Princess was silent for a while. Then she whispered imploringly, "Felice, at least you believe me; you do not think that I planned this—that I have betrayed you?"

Decilis took both her hands in his. "Prisoners," he said, "will believe anything. A

kind of madness seizes one, and everything seems possible. I do not believe it now."

Valeria drew her hands away from him, because her tears were rising again and she wanted to fight them. He misunderstood the action, and an evil impulse moved him. He remembered how she had defied him, saying, "Go back to the old life?"

"I by no means promise that I shall not believe it to-morrow," he said. "What is that English proverb? 'All's fair in love and war.'"

Valeria's emotion was ebbing fast. The joy in it which had been akin to hope had altogether fled, leaving only the pain.

She knew that the shadow of that other man was between them, poisoning every gentle feeling, distorting every impression that she made on that unforgiving, untrusting Italian nature.

Suddenly the silent room was filled with sound, as the thunder pealed out, rattling and clashing among the mountains.

"At last," said the Prince.

"I must go," said Valeria, "the storm will wake her."

"Who is she?"

"Teresa Vieri, the person I dread most in the world, save one."

The thunder pealed again, this time a deafening crash. When its furious echoes died away they were standing close together, and Valeria was trembling.

"You are frightened at it?" asked the Prince, gently.

"No, I am not afraid. Good-by."

"You will come again?" he said eagerly, entreatingly. "Only think of the maddening hours I spend here eating my heart out!"

"To-morrow night, if I can."

She was at the door. Outside a stealthy hand withdrew the bolts. The man on guard was also of opinion that the interview should end.

The candle in Valeria's lamp had gone out. Decilis stared into darkness till a vivid lightning flash revealed her suddenly looking back at him with wide eyes, her white face marked with the stamp of suffering.

Standing still in the darkness that returned upon him, he felt a breath of fresher air as the door opened. It shut again softly and slowly.

CHAPTER XIV

THE night was hot, still, and black dark, or seemed so down in a gorge between towering rock walls. Near by, the hoarse gurgle of a threadlike torrent tried to fill the night's vast silence, but through it could be heard such trifling sounds as the grating of horses' hoofs on hard, slippery ground, bridles clinking, and now and then a loose stone rattling down to the boulders far below.

A dozen troopers were riding in single file along the path which, rising higher and higher, wound and crept along the mountain-side. At their head rode their commanding officer for the time being, Captain Gilbert Charnley, and some paces ahead of the latter, the peasant who was guiding them to supper and a night's lodging. The soldiers — Neapolitan cavalry — were in good spirits. Supper was a certainty, since they would sup at a monastery, and be

welcomed as dear friends and allies. The neighbourhood was, they believed, clear of Frenchmen, the only enemy they had to fear.

Captain Charnley was by no means so cheerful. Not that he was above thinking of a good supper, but other thoughts were stronger and more persistent. One, indeed, pervaded all the others and darkened them. *Cui bono?* What had been the good of a glorious beginning, what the good of Maida even, since after driving the foe triumphantly before them, and sweeping the coast clear, the English had had no choice left but withdrawal to Sicily? They had roused the whole kingdom into rebellion, and by turning their backs on it they left it to the *Massé*, those guerilla bands who would murder and plunder till the French came and cut their throats for them. And the worst of it was that, as he himself owned, retreat had been the one possible course. Well, thank God, he was not back at Palermo yet. He was riding through a black gorge into the unknown.

His was not a changeful nature, and he was in all essentials the same man as the Charnley who fell in love with the little Princess, though

four years, crowded with incident and eager life, might well have blurred even the memory of that past madness. Charnley could have told you — he would never have owned it to mortal man — that a passion may be past and yet not dead, may live on in suggestion and influence even when a dull numbness has taken the place of pain and fierce emotion. The continual restlessness which possessed him, his craving after the absorbing action that brings forgetfulness, a certain crystallisation into hardness and scorn on the part of a nature which happiness would inevitably have softened. All these he owed to Valeria, and in his heart acknowledged the debt. Gentler influences had not come his way. The feverish dissipation of a court in exile did not attract him. That would mean the repetition of what he had gone through already, with all the romance, all the fancy and the glory left out from the very beginning. He had spent three months' leave in England, and had left it with one pleasant and soothing memory, the recollection of Victor Mount's youngest sister, a lovely tomboy, slender, brown-skinned and blue-eyed. But what had he to do with a schoolroom miss

who would some day marry a peer? He had rejoiced in the chance which made him partaker in the glory of Maida, and the stress and strain of the fierce days that followed it. Now he was feeling the reaction of energies long urged to breaking pitch, and hopes bitterly disappointed.

The rock walls drew apart and the mutter of the torrent was lost in its widening bed as the gorge opened out to a plateau, which the peasant guide called a plain. The little troop re-formed and advanced at a trot over the fairly level ground. The air had freshened perceptibly, and here, in what might be called the open, starlight counted for something.

Charnley was wondering what change and chance the next days might bring him; and in fancy chance led him to a mountain village and an old grey castle, and he asked their name, and someone answered, "San Cataldo." He believed that fate would so lead him, but he would not open his lips to ask a question that would bring that day nearer; if he was to be fate's puppet he would be a wholly passive one. Dimly distinguishable by the starlight, a long, low mass of buildings rose

before him. He became aware that the guide was already dismounting before a wall and a gate. Charnley's thoughts, like those of his men, turned supperwards, and, unlike his men, he wished he could have supped elsewhere than in a Carthusian monastery.

At his command the guide knocked long and loud at the closed gates.

A silence followed in which the slightest movement of man or horse was audible. It was disturbed by no sound of bars withdrawn or even of approaching footsteps.

Bidden to try the gates, the man set his shoulders against one side of them and pushed hard, and the door yielding, swung slowly back.

There was a smothered laugh among the men, but Charnley was angry, and showed it. The peasant came hastily to his stirrup.

"This is a strange thing, Signore Capitano, that the gates should be closed, yet not made safe at this hour of the night."

Charnley bade him go to the devil, and open the monastery gates as wide as they would go. This was done, and when the last soldier had passed through them, they were

so left by the captain's order, a trooper being left on guard outside.

The wide courtyard within was dark and silent. Not a light glimmered from the long, low buildings that stretched to right and left. Charnley could hear the saddles creak as his men turned to peer into the darkness, and began to realise that they were uneasy.

A door-bell was found and pulled vigorously. Its echoes clanged, then tinkled, then ceased in utter silence. A shout or two had for all answer the plaintive, far-off howling of a dog.

Captain Charnley had dismounted. Ordering the guide and the trooper to follow him, he groped about till he found another door, which, on being kicked, swung open. Charnley stepped inside. Over his head was the low, sloping roof of a cloister. He passed between the slender pillars which upheld it into the open space beyond.

Trees stood against the sky-line, dark and motionless; he could feel grass rustling under his feet. Ever since sundown thunder had growled in the distance, and the lightning had quivered faintly above the mountain tops. A pale flash swept the sky, playing upon the

twisted pillars and the rough tiles above them. To Charnley it revealed small, low tombstones thick about him, and an open grave at his feet. Then the dark closed down again.

"Signore Capitano," said the soldier behind him, "this is their graveyard. If we keep to the cloister we shall surely get in somewhere."

A hundred faint echoes seemed to follow their retreating footsteps. They found a passage leading to the right, and felt their way down it till they reached an open door. Steps led to it, up which they stumbled.

The heavy fragrance of incense met them on its threshold. In a far corner of the chapel a lamp burned before a shrine, covering with dim light whitewashed walls, dark canvases, the gaunt outline of the high altar, and a huge crucifix that hung above it.

All about them was wild confusion, benches overturned, mass books, vestments, altar tapers littered the pavement. A window lay in fragments. A picture had been torn from its frame. The high altar had been plundered and swept bare, and below it lay a motionless, rigid figure. The peasant seeing it ran for-

ward with a cry, and crouched over the monk, whose bright vestments were thick with clotted blood. "Dead!" he cried, "dead and cold!"

They left the chapel by the inner door. A staircase rose before them, at the foot of which Charnley stumbled over a huddled white-robed figure lying in a pool of blood. Halfway down the long, narrow passage above the stairs, another monk had fallen, clutching his crucifix. There was blood on the walls, blood on the stones under their feet.

They hurried on, opening one cell door after another. Two were empty, but in the third the light of the lamp, which one of them carried, fell on a straight stiff form, hands meekly clasped, and an old man's face, which seemed asleep, so peaceful were the closed eyelids and parted lips. The peasant dropped on his knees, breaking into curses and incoherent lamentations.

"It is the prior of the convent," said the trooper to Charnley. "Someone has been here and laid him out, Signore Capitano; they cannot all be dead."

Yet it seemed at first as if there was but one survivor, and he very near death.

They came to a cell where a monk, lying on a pallet, looked up at them, groaning faintly. As Charnley knelt beside him he tried to turn his head, and fainted. Charnley saw that he had several wounds which had been hurriedly and clumsily bound up. He took out his spirit flask and tried to force a few drops of rum between the closed teeth. After waiting in vain for some sign of returning consciousness he ordered the trooper to take his place and went his way, sick at heart.

In after years the memory of that night sometimes haunted him, and he would see again the little graveyard, the desecrated chapel, the endless passages, the narrow cells; and feel again the brooding presence of untimely cruel death.

The peasant opened the porter's door and admitted the soldiers. The silent monastery woke to life again, loud footsteps and voices echoing down the corridors, lights flaring from the windows of the kitchens, where hungry men were hunting for food. To them crept in a lay brother, who had been crouching like a hunted beast in some outhouse, till he heard the sound of his mother tongue. After pour-

ing wine down his throat they brought him to Charnley, and bit by bit, in bald broken phrases, he told a hideous story.

Late that afternoon a small body of French troops had appeared at the monastery gates. They formed part, so it seemed, of a reconnaissance sent out from Altamura, and having met with unexpected resistance had got separated from the main detachment. They were hot, tired, and furious, and one of their number was slightly wounded.

Food and drink were set before them. Their meal over, the sergeant in command sent for the prior, and told him, with insolence, that he was sheltering wounded insurgents, among them the rebel leader, Don Stefano Petrella, the priest of San Cataldo. These he must now give up. The prior insisted that no insurgents were hidden in the monastery, which was true in so far that they had, by this time all escaped to the mountains, except Don Stefano, who, disguised in a monk's habit, had no need to fear discovery, and was too weak to go. The soldiers began their search, and by an unhappy chance found out that they had been baulked of their prey.

Quite what happened next the lay brother did not know, being in the kitchen washing up dishes, but suddenly a cry went through the house, and the plunder and the massacre began. The old prior was left for dead, but had strength to drag himself into his cell to die.

"And Don Stefano?" Charnley asked.
"Was he killed with the rest?"

"He still lives," said the lay brother; "he lived, at least, when I was with him an hour ago."

"Then I have seen him," said Charnley, "and I doubt if he will last the night."

He had scarcely made a comment on the man's story but he would have given five years of his life to have been able to pursue and overtake the murderers.

Half an hour later he found his way back to the cell where Don Stefano lay dying. It was all in order now, and the lay brother was washing the blood-stains from the tiled floor. It was so still a night that, though the window stood wide open, the draught from the opening door hardly made the flame of the lay brother's taper flicker. The thunder had rolled away plainwards.

With a slow and feeble effort the wounded man turned his head upon the pillow, till his hollow eyes, sunk in shadow, caught the light, and shone feverishly bright. And Charnley, who had said to himself: "What! this white-haired old priest a redoubtable rebel leader? Impossible!" met their piercing, searching gaze, and, moved by a new sensation, understood what manner of man lay dying at his feet. He knelt down hastily.

"You are English?" said Don Stefano.

"I am an English officer," Charnley answered, "sent in temporary command of a detachment of Neapolitan cavalry to visit Apulia and find out how things really stand with the enemy, and what the *Massé* are about."

Don Stefano was listening with strained attention.

"How many?" he said.

"Fifteen and a sergeant."

"It is very few," said Don Stefano.

Charnley went on to express his deep regret that he had no surgeon with him.

"Do not trouble about that," answered the priest. "All the surgeons in the world, my son, could not help me now."

"Tell me, my father," said Charnley, eagerly, "do you know to what regiment these miscreants belonged?"

"I was here till they came in, I can tell you nothing."

"If I could only have pursued them! But my men and my horses were dead beat, and they had some hours' start. If only we had arrived here sooner!"

"What is to be, will be," murmured Don Stefano.

It seemed as though, his grasp on life loosening, he had grown indifferent, and possibilities, the "if only" of human regret, had ceased to move him.

"My father, can I do nothing for you? Nothing?"

Life flamed up again in the eyes that were growing dull.

"Have you no message to leave?" Charnley went on. "No message that I can take?"

Don Stefano tried in vain to speak. A spasm of pain caught his breath. The lay brother moistened his lips with water and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"San Cataldo," he muttered, "you must go to San Cataldo."

Then, as Charnley listened, his heart beating thickly, the hoarse, faint voice spoke again.

"There will be trouble — the Principessa cannot remain there. She is in great peril. You must take her away. Tell my people that if they deal faithfully with her my blessing will abide with them always, and if they deal treacherously, my curse."

Charnley was leaning forward to catch what had become a broken whisper.

"I will go there," he said, "and I will escort the Princess Decilis to a place of safety. I swear it on my honour."

He had taken the dying man's right hand in his. Don Stefano's closed eyes opened again, pitifully, fiercely anxious.

"Do not trust him — do not believe him —" the words grew incoherent, without meaning.

Charnley stole noiselessly away. There was work for him to do before he could rest.

At last it was done. The chapel had been set in order; lighted tapers burned on the altar, and on the pavement before it lay a line of dead, waiting for burial in the morning.

Charnley slept for an hour or two. At day-break he got up, and passing along dim corridors, hardly less sinister now than when they had stretched before him into darkness, paused once more at a half-open door, and then crossed its threshold.

The clear, colourless light of dawn was streaming through the narrow window. The lay brother knelt in prayer. Don Stefano was dead.

Here, at least, death had come, not as a "hideous storm of terror," but quietly as the dawn came. Charnley thanked God for it.

CHAPTER XV

It was the hottest and most slumbrous hour of a scorching afternoon. Nearly all the inhabitants of the castle were enjoying their customary siesta. But the little Princess sat on a painted wooden bride-chest in that tower room, which did duty as a prison, and her husband sat beside her.

They had been talking of Rome and Roman friends and enemies, and Valeria had been hearing how they had fared in the years which lay between her and them. She and Felice had laughed as they talked. Decilis was not by any means the despairing prisoner of four days ago. His face had lost the fierce, haggard look which his first taste of captivity had brought there. He had recovered his mental balance, and could not recall without a certain shame that night when Valeria first visited him. Yet he deliberately reminded her of it.

"Do you remember that night? how I ran to the door and shook it? I am better trained now. I pretend I do not even know that it opens. I pretend that you come through the keyhole. You see, it was so long since I had been a prisoner, not since I was a boy at college, when the rascally servant who had charge of me would go out every evening to his own pleasures, leaving me, locked in, to mine. I caught spiders and made them fight. My brother was alive then, and I was a nobody, a poor, neglected, sickly little devil. Then my brother died, and before long my father, and, behold, a new world! I, who had played with spiders, had any toy I liked to buy, and being sixteen by that time I chose the most brittle and the most expensive."

"And were you happy?" asked the little Princess.

Felice Decilis looked up at the ceiling hung with cobwebs.

"Was I happy? I think not. Before I was twenty-one the toys were all alike to my thinking. I have never been happy in my life for more than two half-hours together."

His companion sighed quickly. His eyes turned to her.

"I was tired of play," he said. "I wanted to live a man's life, and how could I? Could I fight for a government I despised, and which would not even let its subjects fight? Could I fight for the French against my own countrymen, as these Neapolitans do? What was left to me but to spend my days as I have spent them?"

Valeria's eyes had a question in them, a mute, involuntary reproach.

Felice frowned. "You were unlucky," he said, "I acknowledge that. You were such a pretty little doll! But except that your hair and eyes were a different colour — oh, I am convinced that I was a fool — but it is useless to think of that now. Has that *birbante* come back yet?"

"Yes," answered Valeria; "he came back last evening and went away early this morning."

"You saw him?"

"Yes, I cannot refuse to see him. There is Taddeo knocking, I must go."

She slipped down from her high seat and

stood facing him. He rose and kissed her hand.

"How brown your hands are!" he said.
"You should take more care of them. You have altered strangely in these years."

"Have I grown old and ugly?"

His eyes met hers.

"*Per Dio*, no!" he said.

Then they both laughed a little, and she left him.

Valeria, having regained her own rooms, threw herself on a sofa and lay very still, looking straight before her with wide-open, shining eyes. Sometimes she smiled. All the while she was conscious of an inexplicable, unreasoning light-heartedness, which made fear and danger seem unreal, mythical, not to be taken seriously.

Zena Tirico came into the room. The little Princess shifted her position slightly. She felt impatient; she wanted to be alone. Zena stood at the foot of the couch, looking down at her mistress with sombre, troubled eyes.

"Has anything happened?" said Valeria.
"He cannot have returned so soon. Ah!"

sitting upright, "you cannot mean that they have found out — that they suspect?"

"No, no, Eccellenza, but I have heard bad news. Taddeo told me; he is, as you know, from Castle Mauro, and we were children together. The Signore Curato will never need to seek refuge in the mountains any more; he has found one with the blessed dead."

Hurriedly, in few words, she told Valeria of what had befallen the *frati* and those whom they sheltered, and at the end of her dark story came the mention of the English captain and his Neapolitan troopers, who had been the first to discover the massacre, and had buried the dead.

"Think, Eccellenza," she said, "if we were in peril before, we are quite defenceless now. This English officer and these soldiers, if we could reach them — and they are not very far off — would they protect us?"

A strange calm had fallen on the little Princess after her first passionate, silent grief.

"They only can help us," she answered. "It is our one chance, and with every minute, perhaps, it is slipping from us. Did he say which way they were going?"

"They will go by Cestro — after that, who knows? But it would need some strong reason to bring them here. I will go, if you say the word. One thing is certain, I should not fall into that devil's hands — alive."

"It is impossible," said Valeria, in a calm, almost indifferent voice. "You must see how soon you would be missed. If you did not fetch a meal of mine at the usual time, that woman would be here to spy on us. In these days she is bold, and comes and goes almost as she chooses. If I told her you were ill, she would not rest till she found out the truth. You can defend me against her, Zena *mia*, I cannot defend you."

The little Princess went to a window, that looked toward the valley. Just below it cunning hands had made a garden, which by means of terraces and steps and winding paths made its way down the steep hillside till an ancient wall rose up and shut it in. No door broke the time-stained surface of that wall, the home of innumerable happy lizards, and the garden could only be reached from the castle itself. Here, between trimmed ilexes, and thickets of myrtle and oleander, in the

days before the Counts of San Cataldo deserted their fortress home, fair ladies and fair youths had touched the lute and told strange tales of love and mirth and bloodshed.

Since she had become in very fact a prisoner, Valeria had spent much time in that garden. All day long she was free to enter it, but after sunset was excluded from it by Don Mario's order, while one of his men spent the night in the *loggia*, from which a flight of steps led down into it. Don Mario's men, however, had their own ideas of the way in which a watch may be kept. They saw a wide difference between the need for vigilance in the open country, and the need for vigilance in their present luxurious quarters. Thus the *guerilla* warrior who, after partaking of an excellent supper — Teresa Vieri was famous for her *risotto* — betook himself to the *loggia* above the garden, would often snore so loud that in the neighbouring passage you could form your own opinion as to whether his presence was dangerous.

Valeria's eyes rested on the garden, lying scorched in the glaring western sunshine, then rested fixedly on a spot where the walls met

and formed a corner, above which spread a touch of green, the broad leaves of an old gnarled fig tree growing on the shelving rocky ground on the farther side.

Zena, standing beside her, made a quick protesting gesture. Valeria turned, and the two women looked at one another in silence.

CHAPTER XVI

CAPTAIN CHARNLEY had halted at a lonely farm-house near the mountain path, which would lead him to San Cataldo. Built in a country where solitude might always mean danger, the old farm with its broad squat watch-tower, its outbuildings and courtyard enclosed by a massive wall, looked — what it could at any time become — a little fortress.

Charnley and his men reached it late in the evening after riding all day by steep and stony ways, and were well pleased with the lodging and entertainment offered them, with the long low room, where strings of onions and dried fish, hanging from the rafters, and great jars of olive-oil lurking in spare corners, were all eloquent of decent plenty and a satisfying supper to come. Nevertheless, the good man of the house was not especially cordial, doubtful, most likely, whether seventeen hungry men could possibly be fed at a

profit, and it remains an open question whether the seventeen would not have been somewhat disappointed, but for the arrival of another and eighteenth guest.

Charnley was seated at the big table writing a report of what had taken place two nights before, of his coming to the monastery, and what he found there. His men were seeing to their horses, and the farmer was watching them do it, whilst his wife and daughter fried sausages, and plucked fowls preparatory to their roasting. The yard had so resounded with the clattering of hoofs that it was no wonder if Charnley did not hear a horseman ride in and dismount a few yards from the open door. But he heard the housewife let fall something, uttering a sharp startled exclamation, and looking up saw a strange figure bowing to him from the threshold.

It was not the man's dress — Charnley had grown used to strange and party-coloured costumes, and to *guerillas* in velvet jackets clinking with silver buttons, and belts full of fantastic weapons. But his tall lank person, his small head, his pale face dimly distinguishable in the uncertain light, bit into Charnley's

imagination, as some things do, remaining etched there for ever.

The newcomer drew himself up and saluted.

"Signore Capitano Charnley," he said, "your most devoted servant."

Captain Charnley got up.

"Did my sentry challenge you?" he asked.

"Assuredly, and received the countersign. Signore Capitano, you see before you your unworthy servant Mario Vierci, who has ridden some miles to report himself, understanding that such was his duty."

Charnley knew Don Mario's name; it took rank with other names with a daredevil and sinister significance.

He wished him good evening, and inquired where he had left his men.

"My headquarters are at San Cataldo, Signore Capitano. I am alone now, but a detachment of my men is behind me and will arrive when it can."

"I am on my way to San Cataldo," Charnley observed.

"You desired to see me? Then I have saved you the trouble of a rough ride."

Don Mario's voice had lost its smooth suavity.

Charnley reflected for a moment. "That was not my only reason for going there. The Princess Decilis is at the castle. I promised Don Stefano Petrella that I would see her and take her his last messages."

"Ah, poor Don Stefano! It is true he must have believed that she was still there. But Donna Valeria has left the castle, Signore Capitano, and is well on her way to Naples, to rejoin her husband. I myself gave her an escort part of the way — this country is no fit place for women."

"That is true," responded Charnley, absently. He did not see the gleam of mockery that shone in Don Mario's eyes and twitched his prominent lips. So the little Princess was reconciled to her husband, had, no doubt, been graciously pardoned after four years of punishment. Even he had scrupled to leave her alone and among the dangers of a province overrun by brigands.

The mission he had accepted was vain, then, and had fate led him to San Cataldo it would only have been to mock him. So be it. Never except in fancy would he look up at the grey walls of Valeria's prison. Once

again, like a fool, he had dreamed of delivering her, of carrying her safely in triumph, and once again he was baulked.

As for Don Mario, he was now at the housewife's elbow, making inquiries as to the coming supper, and grinning in her half-frightened, half-angry face.

"I tell you," he said, "they shall fare as if they were my own good fellows. None of your scraggy old hens, — the best in the yard, if you value your credit. And don't forget your cream for the *ricotta*, or your excellent *rosolio di Bari*."

It gave him pleasure that Charnley should see how the people feared Don Mario Vierci a hundred times more than they feared an English captain, how his most affable suggestion was a command, and how at his bidding the supper grew to a veritable feast for hungry soldiers.

After supper he and Charnley sat on a bench outside the door, talking and smoking. The Englishman discovered in his new acquaintance (officially speaking his ally and comrade) a man of the middle class, educated and glib-tongued, wholly unlike the silent

half-savage peasant *guerillas* with whom he had hitherto come in contact.

Charnley had a shrewd suspicion that the peasant's savagery might on occasion be outdone by Don Mario's, while the latter must be swayed by some other motive than the peasant's instinctive fanaticism. A lower motive, he was ready to swear. This fellow was surely a fisher in troubled waters, ready to take what he could catch.

None the less, politically he was an ally on whom his (Charnley's) superiors would set a high value. His intelligence was valuable, his knowledge of the country was valuable, his influence as a leader, who had made a name for himself, was more valuable still. Therefore Charnley hid, or flattered himself he hid, his own instinctive aversion from Don Mario Vierci, and talked with him far into the night. Its remaining hours they slept through side by side on a bed of fresh straw spread in the kitchen.

Don Mario, who had ridden hard and was tired out, slept later than his neighbour, whose night had been made restless by wild uneasy dreams. Very early in the morning Captain

Charnley stepped out into the yard and bade a farm-servant open the gates for him. He found his way into a little thick wood of olives which covered the sloping ground behind the buildings. It was so early yet that the mountain's flank lay deep in mysterious shadow, between night and day; only their crowning peaks stood out awake and purple in the clear, pure morning light.

Charnley lit a cigar, wrapped his cloak closer around him, for the air had still the piercing chill of dawn in it, and strolled away up a narrow pathway between the olive trees, under whose still grey foliage dwelt the very spirit of peace. He found there also a singular and pervasive melancholy that at once soothed and saddened him.

Through his thoughts he became aware of a faint rustle, as of light, stealthy footsteps behind him. He swung round abruptly to see that a peasant boy was following him at a couple of yards' distance.

When the Englishman faced him the boy stood still. He was a little fellow of perhaps fourteen, and had taken his cap off, showing a shock of reddish brown hair that fell forward,

half hiding his small pale face. His colouring struck Charnley as unusual; otherwise the boy, wrapped in his shabby cloak, was just like any other lad—the farmer's son, for instance. After he had beckoned to him, and the boy had come a few steps nearer, Charnley noted that he moved stumbingly, as if very weary, dragging heavy feet.

“What do you want?” he asked.

The boy hung his head and spoke very low. “I have come to see the Signore Capitano,” he said.

“*Ebbene*, here he is; what do you want with him?”

As he spoke he threw away the end of his cigar and walked forward.

His tone was careless, but his eyes were keenly watchful.

“I come from San Cataldo, Eccellenza.”

“You have come from San Cataldo, now, in the night? Who sent you?”

“The Signora Principessa.”

Charnley laid an imperative hand on the boy's shoulder.

“What princess?”

“The Princess Donna Valeria Decilis.”

"You lie," said Charnley; "she is not there. She is on her way to Naples."

The boy looked up quickly, shaking his hair back, then dropped his head again.

"I do not lie," he said; "but whoever told you that Donna Valeria has left the castle, lied for his own ends."

Charnley's grasp tightened. "You say that she sent you to me? Have you brought me a letter?"

"No, Eccellenza, for fear that I might be caught. But she gave me this token."

He fumbled under his ragged jacket, drew out something and placed it in Charnley's outstretched hand. It lay on his palm glittering faintly. It was a ring, a narrow hoop made out of two rows of small diamonds and a thin gold band. Charnley remembered it. One day he had held her hand and looked at all her rings—too big they were, most of them, for her tiny fingers. But this one must have fitted, it was so small. With an effort he brought his thoughts back to the practical needs of the situation.

"Your message, then," he said, "and be quick about it."

"She is in danger, and begs that you will come to her."

"I shall be with her by noon. I start as soon as my men have breakfasted. You shall ride with us, and first you shall come in and eat."

The boy started and shrank.

"No, no, Signore Capitano, it would cost me my life. No one must see me; I must go back as I came. And you must not start yet for San Cataldo; you must not reach the castle till after I do."

He made a movement as if to slip from Charnley's grasp.

"Keep quiet," said his captor. "Of whom are you afraid? Who would kill you?"

"Don Mario Vierci, or his men, if they knew that I had come here, and if they catch me."

"Don Mario is here," Charnley answered.

The boy uttered a despairing cry. Gilbert Charnley never knew why a sudden wild suspicious impulse made him bend and stare into his face. The eyes which looked up at him, wide with terror, were blue as the sky — blue as English forget-me-nots — they were the eyes of the little Princess.

"Good God!" he said to himself, quietly.

"Oh, Charnley," cried Valeria's voice, "why did you do it, why could not you have let me go?"

"You have come here," said Charnley — "here — through the night — not alone?"

"Yes, in the night, on foot, in this dress — alone."

"God help me, you must be famished!" cried Charnley, "and there is nothing here fit for you to eat."

The little Princess smiled, compassionate of his bewilderment.

"Do not let that trouble you," she said, "I had food and wine with me, and breakfasted under those trees just as the dawn came. Luckily, I know this road, and guessed that you would halt for the night here. And so Mario guessed it, too — I might have been certain that he would be on the watch for you."

"He said you had left the castle; he represented himself as your friend, the villain!"

"He is my enemy and my tormentor."

Charnley's face grew rigid. "He shall never torment you again," he answered; "I will

shoot him, or hang him, whichever you please. And then you shall leave this wretched country. Sicily will be the safest place for you; it is practically under English rule."

Valeria wrung her hands. "I have told you nothing—nothing," she said. "Don Mario's men hold the castle; how many men have you?"

"What does it matter if they hold your husband's castle, so long as I hold you?"

He would have taken her hands in his, but she shrank back.

"Felice is there," she whispered, "there a prisoner, in the hands of those wretches. You must save him."

Then they both stood silent. Sounds reached them from the courtyard; rough voices shouting greetings; the beat of horses' hoofs—neither heeded them. Gilbert Charnley was tasting dust and ashes. A moment before that old beautiful dream of his had seemed reality. He was the knight who would rescue his Princess from dangers unutterable, and avenge her on her foes. He would carry her away into the wide free world. His hour had come. And he would

be her faithful servant. He would protect her as if she were his sister, and some way should be found to dissolve a marriage which was no marriage and set her free.

"Valeria," he said, "tell me the truth this time."

She raised her eyes bravely to his — eyes in which lay a great sadness.

"I love him," she said, "and I have always loved him."

"And he?" Charnley asked, with sudden fierceness.

"I do not know — sometimes I fancy — I can hardly call it a hope. What does it matter? The question is — can you save him?"

"I have told you that Don Mario is here, in my power. I have only to give the word and he is a dead man."

"He has come alone?"

Once more Gilbert Charnley had seen life through a magic veil, and once more fate had taken the veil and rent it. The hard facts which alone concerned him had recovered their importance; he realised them in all their bearings.

"He said his men would be here at dawn," he answered.

"They are here, then, they have come!" cried Valeria.

"Will they make a fight of it?" said Charnley, his eyes gleaming.

"They will fight rather than let you deliver us, you may count on that. But you will not let it come to fighting, you will draw him into some snare, you will deceive Don Mario. Once you are at San Cataldo we can plan it together."

Charnley answered her coolly enough. No human being could have felt harder and less emotional than he did for quite three minutes.

"Luckily your disguise is a good one. No one could possibly recognise you. You must ride back on my spare horse."

"And before I had ridden many yards," said Valeria, "I should fall, shot through the heart. Some man's carbine would have gone off—by accident; but I should be dead. I must get back as I came, and you must give me time for it. Mario's men will want a few hours' rest. I shall be there to receive you."

"Go back alone and unprotected; you must be mad to talk of such a thing!"

"I swear to you the risk is nothing. When I am still a hundred yards from San Cataldo I scramble up among the rocks and then down again, till I am on the mountain-side below the castle. I creep along under the wall of my garden and I reach an old twisted fig tree and climb. The branches grow low; it is quite easy. Zena, my faithful maid, will be waiting for me on the other side. She will have brought my clothes with her and hidden them in the thicket. She will help me dress, and presently I, no longer a ragged peasant boy, but Valeria, Princess Decilis, shall walk through my garden and up the steps into my castle. Oh, I am not talking at random, I have often done such things before. And now let me go, I entreat you."

Charnley had been listening intently. "What," he said, "no one watches a garden which has a wall that a woman can climb?"

"There is a sentinel at night in the *loggia* above it, and they patrol the chestnut woods."

"I understand," he said; "then you may

be seen from below and shot. Listen, how many of these brigands are there?"

"I cannot say how large the band is, or even how many are in the castle, but the whole village is for him, and some of his men are quartered there. Indeed, I shall be safe. I shall slip between the rocks like a little lizard, and no one will think anything of a peasant lad taking the shortest road down to the valley. But I am in danger here."

As she watched him her heart failed within her. For his eyes said:

"I will not give you up to him. I will keep you, you shall not go."

She answered the look.

"You hold our lives in your hand, Charnley. You once believed that he, or I, or both of us, planned to bring about your death. Here is an easy way of avenging yourself. You have only to call your men and ride back through the passes."

"I don't deserve that — yet," he answered.

The little Princess smiled at him.

"All this while," she said, "my chances are dwindling."

Each minute might be time lost for Valeria. It was time gained for him. Yet he was fighting hard against his fierce longing to take her away by force, and put such a barrier between her and all other men as would make her his for ever. If she had shown fear or shrinking — he judged by the calm courage of her voice and eyes that she did not even know her real danger.

Not far off men were calling to one another. The voices came nearer.

“They are looking for me,” said Charnley.

Valeria stretched out her hands to him.

“Good-by,” she said, “and God keep you.”

He stepped back. “Go quickly,” he said.

Looking back at him she saw that he had covered his face with his hands. She ran on between the olive trees, tears blinding her eyes.

Before Charnley’s came a vision of green woods, silent and treacherous. A puff of smoke broke from them and passed away across the tree-tops. Above on the mountain-side a little figure threw up its arms, fell, and lay still.

CHAPTER XVII

CAPTAIN CHARNLEY rode slowly along the bridle-path which led to San Cataldo. His men rode behind him, and with them the ragged followers of Don Mario. Don Mario, on a fine horse, was close at his side, whenever the nature of the road permitted it, or close behind him.

At breakfast they had had a brief and quite courteous explanation. Charnley had announced his intention of going to San Cataldo.

"The night has brought you this counsel?" asked Don Mario, whose pale face remained unreadable.

"Yes," said Charnley, "I have been thinking it over. I think that you may have made a mistake — perhaps an intentional one."

Don Mario followed his move with scarce a moment's hesitation.

"A mistake about the Princess, Signore Capitano?"

"Exactly so," returned Charnley, dryly.

Don Mario shrugged his shoulders. "Since your penetration is of that quality, how can a simple soldier like myself hope to keep anything from you? You will perhaps say why should I wish to keep the Princess from you or you from the Princess? It is not a bad thing, signore, in these days to have a princess for one's friend and a castle for one's headquarters. But you are a bird of passage: you would fly away and take that little bird with you, leaving nothing but an empty nest."

There was a covert hint of insolence under the candour of all this that turned Charnley sick; but he kept his disgust behind his teeth.

"She is there," he said; "I thought as much."

Don Mario smiled. "I should not have told you if I had not seen that you were obstinate. You knew the Signora Principessa in Rome, perhaps, before the Prince shut her up? Such abominable cruelty!"

But if he expected confidences from Charnley he did not get them, receiving only a grudging admission of some former acquaintance with Donna Valeria.

Now, as they rode together, he studied the Englishman curiously, busy spinning plans in which the said Englishman should be a big fly bound in a subtle web and he the triumphant spider.

"There is plenty of him," he reflected, "and some women, little women, think much of that. But he has that abominable English stiffness; I would as soon have a tree for a lover! That, however, is not the question."

The sun was high in a clear sky, and the shade which had hitherto protected them from his fierce beams was shrinking visibly. Yet they did not feel his full strength till, leaving the narrow pass behind them, they turned a corner and rode out upon the strip of open ground before the towering gates of the castle.

Captain Charnley stared up, shading his eyes with one hand from the midday glare. There it stood, the old castle of the Counts of San Cataldo, with its flanking towers, its high, lofty, crenellated walls, above the ravine that on this side served it in lieu of a moat. His keen eyes followed the centre row of windows—renaissance windows these, not Norman arrow-slits—and saw that a long

piece of scarlet drapery hung motionless from one of them. He felt his strained nerves relax ; he had not known till then in what a nightmare of dread he had spent the last hours. Valeria was safe. His evil forebodings had proved as false as forebodings mostly do. He lowered his eyes to the gateway, whose doors were swinging back, dragged from within. Don Mario was in conversation with an armed peasant, presumably the sentinel on guard. Charnley rode up to the two men.

"I have grilled here long enough," he said ; "conduct me to the Princess." The gates having opened wide they rode through them along the paved passage.

"Here we cross the ravine," remarked Don Mario, where the ground rang hollow under foot. "Ah, it is a wonderful old nest, as you will see ; there is room in it for your men, and my men, and a little army besides."

"That means," thought Charnley, "that most likely he has lied about the number of his fellows, curse him !"

Then he forgot Don Mario, for he was in the courtyard and caught sight of a vaulted

stairway and a little figure standing on its lowest step. He dismounted hastily and walked toward her, his sabre clanking over the stones. Don Mario, sitting motionless, watching them with an ugly eagerness, saw Donna Valeria stand there pale and smiling, saw her stretch out a hand which Charnley, bending his stiff shoulders, kissed.

As for Charnley, he saw again the little Princess he had known of old, the girl who had looked at him as she drove slowly by, and whose blue eyes had changed the current of his life. Those eyes, feverishly bright, met his now. He and she smiled at one another triumphantly, then Valeria spoke:

"I cannot see Felice because Taddeo is not on guard yet. Can you make some pretext to call all these men together?"

"By Gad!" said Charnley, "I'll review them, here in the court."

"Do it before dinner," said Valeria, "at about four o'clock, and then come to me in my apartments." She raised her voice, for Don Mario was approaching. "I shall be pleased to receive you later, Signore Capitano, and I hope that you will give me the pleasure

of your company at dinner. And you also, Don Mario," she added, turning to her enemy with a smile such as she had not bestowed on him for many a long day.

And Mario smiled as he accepted the gracious invitation, persuaded that he saw a way out of all his difficulties — not precisely the way he would have chosen, but what will you? Fate has to be reckoned with, and one cannot have everything! Power at least was his. He had them in the hollow of his hand — Don Felice and the stiff-necked, arrogant Englishman, and the beautiful woman who hated Mario. They were his puppets, and would have, practically, to dance as he pleased.

"I fear," said Valeria, "that I have only poor mountain fare to offer you and your men, but I will do my best. I dine at six o'clock."

Both the guests she had bidden were glad to bow, so that the triumph in their eyes might not betray them.

The huge shadow of the castle spread slowly over the whole courtyard, and by four

o'clock was creeping up the mountain-side beyond the ravine.

Charnley had been seeing to the quartering of his men. He himself was conducted by Don Gennaro to a chamber opening, as did all the state rooms, upon the great corridor, but situated as far as it could be from the staircase and the Princess's apartments.

He had not been there long when someone knocked softly at his door, and going to it he saw the maid who had stood behind Valeria at the foot of the steps while she welcomed her visitors.

Zena had brought him a letter, being free to do so because Don Mario had recalled all his men, save one, from their posts, so that he might prepare them for the English officer's inspection. A guard no longer lolled and ate onions on the brocaded bench at the door of the Princess's anteroom.

Half an hour later Charnley stood in the courtyard watching Don Mario's men display their horsemanship and their skill as marksmen. They were fine-looking fellows, well-mounted and well-armed, and he could not but regret the inevitable fate that would turn

them from *guerillas*, good soldiers after their kind, into mere brigands and assassins who would end their lives as galley-slaves or be slain in obscure *vendette*.

The sound of shots cutting the still hot air reached Don Felice in his prison, and filled him with intense excitement.

He fancied that the castle was being besieged by the French and that the hour of his deliverance had come. In fairness to him it must be explained that the delusion did not last long. The absence of any other sounds suggesting attack and defence, and echoes of the applause which sometimes followed close upon a shot, brought him to the more reasonable conclusion that a military display of some kind was going on a stone's throw from him. And the barred window was so high above him that even the painted wooden chest that he dragged forward only brought his head and shoulders on a level with it, and the bars were so close set as to defeat all attempt to lean out.

The Prince cursed the window, and fate, and Don Mario, whose hateful voice he thought he could distinguish shouting sharp

words of command. He came very near to cursing Valeria. Why had she left him so long? Why did she come so seldom now?

He remembered that he had seen her the day before. But this recollection did not appease a wrath born of unbearable irritation and fierce impatience. The hours that lay between one coming and another had become capable of quite unaccountable expansion, of lengthening out indefinitely. He accepted the fact as a fact, without question. And instinctively he blamed Valeria for it.

If the little Princess had known all this, perhaps the face he turned to her as she shut the heavy door behind her would not have made her heart grow so cold and heavy within her. Of late, such a different expression had flashed into his eyes as they first rested on her, and to-day she had counted upon that mute welcome to give her courage and strength. She stood silent, and Decilis saw the light and colour that shone in her eyes and flushed her cheeks die out of them.

"What is all this?" he asked, in a low voice, going nearer to her. "What is the meaning of this infernal shooting and shouting?"

Valeria answered him, so he thought, like a child repeating a lesson.

"Don Mario is reviewing his men. Felice, it is for the English officer, who is here with a detachment. He came an hour ago."

"An English officer," echoed the Prince, in blank surprise. His look and voice changed suddenly. He said, "Is it Charnley?"

"Yes," said Valeria, "he is here at my request — I was able to communicate with him. I asked him to come, and save us."

She would never have said those words had she weighed them beforehand. They came of themselves at a moment when she had no choice except to speak hurriedly, rashly, or to remain altogether silent.

The Prince laughed, Valeria shivered imperceptibly. The old sense of helplessness came back upon her at the sound of that laugh. Never would she, who had just risked her life for his, have power to convince him, if he should meet her at the outset with mocking incredulity.

It seemed to her then that she had fallen under a worse bondage than the old constraint and fear. At least in the old days she could

arm herself with a mute defiance. To-day she had no shield to use against him, only a paralysing dread of the pain it was in his power to inflict.

"And how does Captain Charnley propose to save us?"

Decilis asked the question as if it were a matter of politeness, something expected of him.

"I do not know — yet," Valeria answered. "There has been no time to plan anything. I have not seen him — alone."

A momentary emotion passed like a flash over Felice's face, and vanished.

He spoke again with the same air of keeping up a compulsory conversation. "Are you aware that the English Government looks upon Don Mario and his crew as valued allies, personages who must be supplied with money and arms, flattered and kept in a good-humour?"

"Yes," said Valeria, "I know it. But you do not know Charnley."

"Ah," said the Prince, "you expect me to believe that this Englishman, out of a pure generosity, a magnanimity worthy of the pala-

dins of romance, will disobey orders, and act contrary to his military duty, for the sake of helping a man who is his political and personal foe? I neither believe it, nor will I pretend to believe it. You — if you believe it — are deceiving yourself, or letting yourself be deceived."

Valeria was silent. She stooped and picked up a book which had fallen on the floor. Felice, watching her through narrowed eyelids, was shaken by a sudden fury, a fierce longing to drag her secret out of her, to know, once and for all, whether she was a monster of hypocrisy, or merely a strange, childish, incomplete little being, living in a world of dreams, whether the days of his captivity had meant for her an opportunity, the chance to carry out a deliberately conceived plan, that should culminate in a diabolically refined vengeance, or whether she had let herself drift with a child's capriciousness, a child's blind recklessness.

She looked up at him. Her clear eyes gave him no answer. The fierceness of his baffled longing was so great that he began to wonder how much longer he could fight against it.

"We shall know soon," said Valeria. "I must go now, or I shall be missed."

Not till he heard the sound of the closing door, the rattle of the outer bolt as her fingers dragged it forward, would he allow his strained self-control to be relaxed even by the slightest bodily movement. He believed that if he stirred he would kill her. But when he was alone, and Valeria was safe from him, the reaction came.

Once more, as on the first day of his captivity, he raged like a trapped wild beast. He flung his whole weight against the door, as if he had believed it possible to break through its massive strength. The door scraped on the lintel and swung slowly outward, and Decilis came down upon his knees on the step below it. Amazement stupefied him for a moment. Then he understood. Valeria's weak fingers had failed to drive the outer bolt home. Always, so she told him, Taddeo saw to that bolting. To-day it had been left to her.

He sprang to his feet. In the bride-chest there lay hidden a knife which the Princess had brought him. He took it, and

crossed the room again with swift noiseless footsteps.

Escape! Freedom! It was not in his power to look beyond those two possibilities. They had come to him at a moment when the utmost humiliation of powerlessness had roused in him an answering passion of revolt.

He passed out through the half-open door, and drew it gently to behind him. He was at the top of a short flight of steps leading down into one of the long vaulted passages which connected the lower and more ancient portions of the castle. It seemed deserted, but listening intently he heard on his right such a slight sound as a man may make by shifting from one foot to the other. A shot rang out in the courtyard, and a clapping of hands followed.

Decilis crept down the steps. His guard had climbed to the nearest window, and was watching the shooting. Even as he guessed this, Decilis began to push home the bolt which under Valeria's fingers had stopped short by half an inch. Presently he crept down the steps. He looked about him. The man at the window was clinging to the bars

and pressing his face against them. Said Decilis to himself: "The fool! I might pass him and he would not know it!"

But to run that additional risk was needless. To the left the passage would lead him into that central wing of the castle which contained Valeria's apartments. With the need for action he was growing cool again. He foresaw the use which he would make of his freedom.

The man at the window laughed delightedly. At that moment Decilis turned the corner of the passage, and was gone.

CHAPTER XVIII

Not long before, the little Princess had gone that way with something like despair in her heart.

She struggled gallantly to persuade herself that what weighed upon her was really a natural feminine weakness, the mere outcome of fatigue and extreme physical effort. Earlier in the afternoon she had found forgetfulness, sleeping till Zena warned her that the men were assembling in the castle court, and Taddeo was once more on guard. Now, though she lay down at full length on her couch, her quick-coming thoughts retained a painful distinctness.

Sometimes within her closed eyelids she saw the olive trees, silver-grey, and every branch traced delicately in the unearthly light of dawn, and against them Charnley, his honest eyes young and eager with compassion-

ate tenderness, and later with that light gone out. But more often she saw the face of Felice Decilis, as a pale smiling mask which mocked her — saw it clear-cut like a cameo, and a background of dead wall behind it. Even so she had seen it, years ago, stand out from the whitewashed wall of the convent parlour, and had read in it things undreamed of, a world of possibilities and promises.

How bitterly that face had disappointed her — but it was beautiful still! And lately it had ceased to be a mask, baffling and misleading.

She had learnt that there lay behind it a character much simpler and less mysterious than she had fancied, a strong nature that might have been ardent could its latent enthusiasms have found an outlet, warped perhaps, embittered perhaps, but at its core neither frivolous nor corrupt. Yes, for a little while she had known the real man, and he had been dependent on her. He had listened for her footsteps and wearied for her presence. This was what his captivity had brought her, and yet the one thing that kept her from indeed despairing was the consciousness of

all that she had risked and done to end it. Looked back on, the years of her own captivity seemed merely a preparation for those few hours of stress and danger. Three years ago she had been weighed down by her life's miserable monotony, its purposeless deadness, and Zena had told her how if she would but consent to disguise herself and dress as a peasant boy they might escape together, and run the country-side free and happy. Who would suspect or molest two peasant lads? She would promise the Signora Principessa that, though she might be tired and footsore and hungry, she would despair of life no longer.

And her promise had been fulfilled. How often Valeria had climbed down from the wall of the castle garden, and the old fig tree's protecting branches, into the free world outside; and as often her English blood had danced at the sense of freedom and adventure, and had lured her on to face small hardships and defy instinctive fears! Thereby she had learned strength and courage, and not to fail when the time came to stake her life so that Felice might be free. But he was not free yet.

Her faith in Gilbert Charnley had not been touched, much less shaken by her husband's bitter incredulity. Charnley would do his utmost for the woman who had let him love her, and love her vainly, and the man who, now as ever, barred his way. Perhaps in his eyes the Prince was still his would-be murderer, the author of a foul plot against his life.

"Even so," thought Valeria; "he will do it."

She trusted him all the more because she knew how fiercely he had been tempted, and tempted in vain.

Zena entered from the anteroom. She had, she said, been helping in the kitchen, where the old cook and Teresa Vierci had their hands full, preparing supper for so many hungry men. Nevertheless it would be a great feast, and do her mistress credit.

"I forgot where you were," Valeria answered, dreamily. "I thought I heard you just now moving quietly about in the bedroom."

Zena threw open the bedroom door.

"There is no one here," she said. "How could there be? Mario met me outside the

kitchen, swearing like a cat at the English captain's politeness. He is hard to please, is Mario ! Teresa we are safe from, to-day at all events."

"It must have been my fancy," the little Princess answered. "And the English captain?"

Zena was standing in the doorway between the two rooms.

"Yes, Eccellenza, I met him also," she said ; "he was going to his room, and he will be here presently."

"I shall know soon."

It was the Prince who comforted himself with this assurance, as he stood hidden behind the curtain of the alcove and the loosely hanging curtains of the bed. He could hear not a sound in the *salon*. But his wife's last question and Zena's answer had reached him, and they were all sufficient.

He knew from Valeria herself that, since she had been to all intents a prisoner in her own apartments, Zena alone had waited upon her, bringing her all her meals. Zena would go presently and Gilbert Charnley would make his appearance, and he, Decilis, would

step out from his hiding-place and play the spy. That opportunity was coming ever nearer with Charnley's approaching footfalls — he did not look beyond it.

Zena had left the folding doors ajar so that her mistress might be troubled with no more fancies. The room beyond them was quite silent again. Surely that was a step, though! While he strained his ears he did not forget how Valeria's heart must be throbbing.

He caught the creak of an opening door, and another sound that might be a faint suppressed cry. Faint as it was it fired his blood again. Halfway across the room he stopped short. Someone was speaking.

"Eccellenza, I see that I have startled you. You were expecting someone else?"

"Mario!" said Decilis to himself, and went stealthily to the spot he had already chosen. He did not catch Valeria's answer. It must have been brief, for Don Mario's rejoinder came quickly.

"I make no apologies, Signora Principessa, for this is not the time for humility and submissive behaviour on my part, or the airs of a great lady on yours. There are hours when

the great lady is as the serving-wench; in spite of which I did not choose that you and the Englishman should meet alone, and I have sent his sergeant to him with a string of tiresome questions. He will not get here yet awhile."

"You seem to have come here to insult me," said the little Princess. "What good will that do you?"

"You are a brave woman," thought Don Felice. "I do not know yet if I shall kill Charnley, but every drop of my blood tells me that I shall kill that cur."

"I have seldom any time to waste," said Mario, blandly, "and this evening less than ever. I am here to speak of a business matter, not to offer insults or take them. At first I will tell you what I am sure of, for otherwise we should waste minutes while you tried to hide what would be evident to a half-blind man. Such is the way of all women. It was upon this Charnley's account that the Prince banished you to San Cataldo — which I have always maintained was an ill-advised proceeding, since the gentleman might very well come and join you here. He has come

— at last. I should much have preferred to keep you in my own power, but I recognise that it has now become impossible. Half a loaf is better than no bread. You shall go free with your lover, and I will take charge of your husband.”

A minute’s silence, then Valeria’s voice, hard and clear :

“Do you remember what I swore to you by my own blood? That I would rather that you should stab me to the heart than hurt one hair of my husband’s head? And you thanked me for my frankness — have you forgotten?”

“No, but I thought you had! Also I was about to tell you that I would not promise to rid you of him. It will most likely suit me to make terms for myself through his good offices, or else to hold him to ransom. Your kind heart must be satisfied with that. And now you must give me your word of honour not to tell the Englishman that Don Felice is nearer than Naples.”

Said Valeria, “He knows where my husband is; he is probably speaking to him at this moment.”

Mario swore hideously, and the listener smiled, thinking, "That was a good thrust, but I hope she is mistaken."

"Fool that I was," cried Don Mario, "not to hide you away in some dungeon, and let him find you if he could! When will you understand that you are playing with death?"

Valeria's voice, trembling now, answered hurriedly:

"It is not true that Charnley knows where he is — why are you going?"

"I am going to make sure that you were lying."

Thought the Prince, "Can I get there before he does?"

In the next instant he heard the Princess speak again: "Do as you please. Here is Captain Charnley."

He drew a quick breath. The danger was over.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Charnley entered he showed not the least sign of surprise at finding that his fellow-guest had preceded him.

Zena Tirico coming into the anteroom a few minutes earlier had heard the sound of a familiar, hated voice, had lain in wait for the Englishman and warned him of Don Mario's whereabouts. Now, carrying the dinner tray, she followed Charnley into the room.

Dinner was laid on the same round table at which Valeria and the Prince had been sitting that evening when Don Mario took them by surprise. The latter was now its guest, suddenly raised to something like equality with its mistress.

Mario was not beyond being flattered by the honour accidentally done him, and it was characteristic of him that what most tickled

his vanity was the knowledge that he had imposed his presence on his companions, a presence hateful to both, and a source of terror to one. Now and again his sense of power betrayed itself in some word or look or tone; but he kept a careful watch upon himself, talked little, and would scarcely drink a mouthful of the rich, strong wine provided for him.

The little Princess felt in every nerve the sharp contrast her two guests presented, the contrast as she saw it, of light and darkness, good and evil, and with all that, she was grateful to Charnley for embodying light and goodness in so prosaic and solid a fashion. Old memories of the days in Rome came back, and she almost smiled at them. He was unchanged though he had grown older and stronger. Even this small circumstance helped to keep her pulses steady. He had washed off the day's dust and soil, and his well-brushed uniform was speckless, a plain shabby uniform in strong contrast with Don Mario's theatrical finery.

His manner to her, formal and coldly distant, never varied. Only now and then did

an eloquent light shine in his grey eyes as they met hers. It was an honest light, full of courage and resolution and suppressed excitement.

Charnley had fought a hard fight since the day dawned. The field, he believed, was won, but the price of victory had yet to be paid. He was paying it now, as he noted the subtle change which years and suffering had wrought in the woman he had loved, the expression of her lips and eyes, the quiet dignity of her manner—pathetic at such a moment—the power over herself she showed in every look and tone. Her nature, he told himself, had ripened and grown perfect. The old bitterness, the fierce resentment which he had cherished against her was dead at last. She had played with his love, he recognised, because till then the love that men had offered her had only been worth playing with or spurning. The world had taught her, in those past days, to hide her real nature under a mask of fantastic wilfulness, but it had no more power to corrupt her heart than a breath has to tarnish a mirror.

Fate had brought them together once more so that he might acknowledge his blind injus-

tice, might learn to know her at last before she passed out of his life for ever.

Would he have accepted that harsh decree, but for the all-present consciousness of the danger in which Valeria stood? It is certain that it roused every chivalrous impulse of which he was capable, and kept them at white heat.

As may be supposed, Mario Vierci fastened a keenly attentive watch upon his companions. He was also aware that they baffled him. When they talked, their conversation was of Rome, and people whose names he had never heard, and matters of trifling import. He saw how Charnley's eyes sometimes lost their hardness, and chuckled to think that, cautious as he was, the proud Englishman should still betray himself.

Zena Tirico waited upon one and the other, her sombre eyes as watchful as Mario's.

The evening was fresh and cool. But to the little Princess the lofty room with open windows felt airless.

Said Valeria: "I have forgotten my fan. Zena, be so good as to fetch it for me. You will find it on my table."

Zena was setting down a fruit dish upon the table. The time she took to place it there and reach the doorway of the Princess's bed-chamber gave Don Felice time to step back a yard or two. No more.

Even so he averted a great danger. Zena did not catch sight of him till she had pulled the door to behind her. He was standing looking at her with his finger pressed against his lips. She did not start visibly, but, as she came close to him, he could see that she was trembling.

"Take the fan in," he whispered, "and then come back here."

Zena obeyed. She found the fan and went back into the *salon*. Some minutes followed; to Decilis they were painfully long ones. He could hear no voices, only light footsteps, Zena, no doubt, moving to and fro. Supposing, he thought, that she was secretly in league with Mario, or that Charnley had bought her? Supposing that excitement made her clumsy and so drew attention and question? Well, he would risk all those chances rather than beat an ignominious retreat.

A ray of light streamed in through the opening door, then vanished. It had shone for an instant on Zena's scarlet bodice. She made sure that the door was closely shut before approaching the Prince.

"Come into the passage," she whispered imperiously, "and, for your life, make no noise!"

The Prince stole after her. She was waiting for him on the little stairs that, winding down through the thickness of the outer wall, connected the first-floor rooms with the passages of the lower story.

"What have you to say?" he asked her, as she faced him silently in the dim light. "Be quick, I want to be back at my post of observation."

"You will ruin us all," said Zena, bitterly. "They may be hunting for you already. Teresa will have taken your dinner in and found the place empty."

"*Dio mio*, I forgot that creeping spy of his!"

Said Zena: "She is certain to be late to-night, but then she might send her father-in-law. There is but one thing to be done, Eccellenza."

"If I go back," said the Prince, "the guard will receive me. I might kill him, certainly, but even that would only complicate matters."

"Signore Principe, I will go myself, carrying food with me, and I will tell the guard I have been ordered to bring your dinner. At this hour I fetch my own supper from the kitchen. He will certainly let me go in, and I will wrap myself up in the bedclothes, or, better still, put on a coat of yours. It will be dark in there. Does Teresa bring a light?"

"Never. She comes while it is still light, and I never speak to her. But the guard will tell Teresa that I have dined already, that you have gone in and not come out again."

"Not he, he will be in too great a hurry to get to his own meal. The guard is changed in the evenings, and the new one comes when the dinner comes. To-night he will have ate a great deal. He will go to sleep soon, and then you must come and let me out — or leave me there. It must be as my mistress wishes."

"You can trust her. Have you a knife?"

"Yes, Eccellenza, a good one." She went a few steps down the stairs, then paused, turning back with upraised face, "You too

can trust her," she said, "if you do not you are a fool!"

Decilis sprang down after her, and caught her by the shoulder.

"And the Englishman?" he said. "Would you have me trust him also?"

"What do I know?" the girl retorted. "I only know that she values your little finger more than the Englishman's whole body."

Don Felice stood aside, and she hurried on, her quick footfalls echoing down the stone steps.

Unheard, the Prince slipped back to his post of observation. The doors were now close shut. But Charnley's voice reached him speaking curtly and clearly:

"I do not understand what you mean."

"I will make my meaning plain then," Don Mario answered. "I have already put it before the Signora Principessa, besides, this is a man's matter, though there is a woman in it. I am a plain soldier, if I express myself too plainly your Excellencies must excuse me. Signore Capitano, when you leave this place, you intend, I suppose, to take this lady with you?"

Charnley's answer came readily. "This is not a fit residence for any lady. With Donna Valeria's permission, I will escort her —"

He paused and Mario put in: "Do not trouble yourself to say whither you will take her, it is no concern of mine. You mean her to go with you. I wished to hear that from your own lips."

"But, as you say," Charnley answered, "it is a matter which does not concern you."

"That was not what I said, signore. Do you suppose you could take her away if I opposed it? You have a handful of troopers behind you, I have my men and the people of San Cataldo. Would they let you carry off their beloved Princess, unless I bade them? Ask Donna Valeria, if you doubt *my* word."

Said Charnley, "You wish to strike a bargain with me, what is it?"

It was Valeria who answered. "He will let me go if you will leave the Prince, my husband, in his keeping; and I answer that I would kill myself rather than allow such an infamy. He will not believe or understand this, but you will."

"I do not understand mad people," sneered

Don Mario, "but the Signore Capitano, being English, no doubt does. At the same time, signore, what she says must be quite as unreasonable in your eyes as in mine. For the rest, she has put the case correctly. I will not oppose her going, provided you do not attempt to interfere between me and my prisoner, Don Felice Decilis."

Charnley spoke slowly. "He is not a prisoner of war; you have no right to keep him."

"The same right that you have to run off with the Princess — I cannot bring myself to part with him. There, there, I see that if I remain here any longer we shall misunderstand one another. Explain the matter to the Princess in your own way; with her permission I will withdraw and go down to my men and yours, and see that they are not drinking themselves quarrelsome. Then I will come back, hoping that everything will be settled, and it will only remain to arrange for your safe and secret departure. It is better, in any case, not to take the San Cataldesi into our confidence."

Don Mario had hardly left the room before

the little Princess stood up, white and shaking. "See that he really goes!" she whispered.

Charnley opened the doors into the ante-room.

"Clean gone," he answered, coming back to the table. "Good God, don't look so distressed! It is not possible that you — Valeria!"

"He has gone to Felice. He will kill him or have him taken away to-night — now!"

Her voice rose to a cry. To one man who heard them the words meant the bitterness of defeat, none the less bitter just then because he had accepted defeat beforehand, and to the other a sudden and supreme conviction, triumph, remorse, delight, a world of new emotions. But one swift thought drove all this from him. He had remembered that Zena Tirico had taken his place in prison.

"That devil will kill her," he thought; "unless I kill him first!"

CHAPTER XX

ZENA was standing in the dark shadow to the right of the window, her figure no more than a dim outline. The crescent moon shone in from a cloudless sky; the room grew slowly darker, very slowly. She watched the creeping shadows and strained her ears to catch the faintest approaching sound.

Quite suddenly there arose a mutter of voices. People were talking, so she judged, in the passage below the prison door. The muttering approached, and as she listened to it she turned cold.

"Those are men's voices," she thought. And just then someone from the foot of the steps called a few words sharply, and Zena knew that she would have to do, not with a woman, but with Mario Vierci.

Don Mario was ascending the steps slowly, because he was meditating a little speech that

he would make to his prisoner, the thought of which soothed susceptibilities much irritated and injured during the last hour. He was enraged at the little Princess and Charnley, with their polite indifference to his presence, and it irked him to feel that he could not make them pay for it. Here under his hand was someone who could be made to pay!

He fumbled at the upper bolt of the door, and, to his amazement, found it drawn back. He tried the lower bolt with the same result. A minute or two before, he had given the guard, whom he had found hungry and grumbling, leave to go to supper. The man had gone so promptly that he was already out of ear-shot, when, furious at his discovery, Mario shouted to him to come back. He stopped shouting after the first call. Teresa must have forgotten to bolt the door after taking the Prince his supper. He would give her what she deserved, and Cecco too, but after all had the Prince come out of his prison he would have walked into Cecco's arms. He opened the door just sufficiently to pass in, and as he did this, caught sight—so he thought—of a huddled figure lying on the pallet bed.

He went a step downwards into the room, and turned a little to draw the door to behind him.

Swift and sudden as a wild beast something sprang upon him out of the shadow, sharp steel struck him between the shoulders, and he fell crashing down the remaining steps to the floor of the room.

For one wild triumphant instant Zena believed that she had killed him; then recovering reason, she fled through the door, slammed it to, and bolted it. She was on her knees driving home the second bolt. Not a sound or a movement reached her from within, but in the passage below her someone was moving stealthily. She sprang down the steps, and was caught in the hard sudden grasp of a man's arms.

She recognised her captor by the mere touch of the hand he pressed against her lips. An instant later he let her speak.

"I have stabbed him," she gasped, "he is in there. Come quickly, the other guard will be here presently. Quick, I hear him coming."

It was a lie, but it served her purpose, to keep the Prince away from Mario — Mario,

who might even now be crouching with his pistols ready, believing that his assailant would come back to finish his work.

Felice followed her, inwardly cursing the futile suspicions that had made him leave his prison-house an hour too soon. A little patience, and he would have reached its threshold over his enemy's dead body.

But there came a moment when that regret vanished for ever.

They were back in the Princess's room. Zena went straight to the folding doors and threw them open, and as she met Valeria's wondering, startled gaze, announced "His Excellency Prince Decilis."

Then did Felice Decilis know a singularly keen and unshadowed sense of triumph. He saw the man who had once been his deadly foe and the woman whom he had once hated, and for a brief space read their very souls, recognising the honour of the one, the limpid purity of the other, and also what had kept it pure.

He bowed to Charnley and took Valeria's hand.

"Don Mario is in my place," he said, "and

that brave woman has wounded him. We have one chance of safety, to fly while these things are still undiscovered."

The little Princess was looking at him with a wan, dazed smile, that cut Gilbert Charnley to the heart. He spoke roughly and imperiously.

"Take her away," he said; "take your wife away. Get down into the woods and wait for me. I will be answerable for Don Mario, and I will join you with my men as soon as possible."

Zena put her arm round her mistress and led her away, saying:

"She cannot go dressed like this." The two men were left alone together.

Charnley strode up and down in impatient agitation.

The Prince began to describe what had taken place, and broke off, finding that the Englishman was not listening to him.

"I can't hang him," said Charnley, bitterly, "and I can't fight him. My hands are tied. Unless, of course," brightening a little, "he won't be fooled into believing that I knew nothing of your escape, and I have no choice but to fight my way out."

"You forget," said Don Felice, quietly, "if you play your part with only moderate skill, he will believe that my wife and I have tricked you. The one thing that he will never believe is that you would set me at liberty."

Charnley turned and looked at him, his eyes very bright and stern.

"Your wife," he said, "has saved you. She came to me at dawn to-day ; she had crossed the mountains, alone, by night. She staked her life to win your freedom."

Don Felice stood silent. He had turned very pale. Zena, dressed as a peasant boy, came into the room and touched his elbow.

"The Signora Principessa is ready," she said.

She waited for a minute or two before following him, and explained to Charnley how they would get away by the *loggia* into the little garden — owing to the supper there would be no sentinel — and how they would creep down the mountain-side and wait for him at a spot which she described.

Then Charnley left her and made his way through the anteroom and down the great corridor to visit his men at their supper,

and start the double game he was forced to play.

They were out on the mountain-side, and nearing the shelter of the chestnut woods.

"Stop here and rest," said Decilis, gently, and the little Princess leant against a smooth rock and rested.

She could hear the faint rustle of Zena's receding footsteps, and the stir of a little breeze in the chestnut branches. She no longer feared for Felice or for herself. She felt that she had escaped from a dim world of nightmare-like terror, into a new world where the wild herbs smelt sweet under her feet, and the stars shone, and no tumult or fear could come.

"Tell me," said Decilis, "tell me, is it true that you went to him alone, through the mountains, at the risk of your life?"

His voice had no softness in it now, it was a fierce rough whisper.

"Yes, it is true."

"And you went not for his sake, but mine?"

"Not for his sake, but yours."

"Then from first to last I have misjudged you, insulted and wronged you?"

"From first to last."

He went close to her. "Is it forgiveness?"

She did not speak, but he felt her tremble.

"I love you," he said, "and as for all the rest, all the past, I will make you forget it."

He himself had forgotten it already. Life was this and this only, a little space of fragrant night, and the presence of a woman whom he loved.

Zena had climbed that rocky hillock near the turn of the road from which, one afternoon not long ago, she had watched the Prince and his ill-fated servant ride by.

Below her she could see the road's pale steep surface, and when she looked up her keen eyes could just distinguish between the dark mass of the castle on the ridge to the right, and the mountains rising behind it.

Crouching among the rocks she looked and listened. Once she thought she caught the faint far-off beat of horses' hoofs approaching along the valley; she strained every nerve to hear, and realised that the sound had no exist-

ence save in her own excited brain. Even to her came an illusion of security and peace. For in the starlight the land lay dreaming from the mountains to the sea, the fields, and the vineyards, and the fever-haunted plain, where centuries ago in streets and palaces the hot pulse of city life had throbbed fiercely on nights such as this. Zena stretched her tired limbs and sighed, "If only I had killed him, and knew it!" she thought for the hundredth time. But the regret had lost its keenness. She began to grow drowsy.

She roused herself with a startled movement. Could those lights be moving across the mountain-side up there to the right? No, they flashed from the castle windows, and were being carried from room to room.

She lay down flat and dragged herself forward till she leant over the road, and heard, far distant as yet, but rapidly drawing nearer, the steady hoof beats of a troop of horse.

She had a momentary hideous vision of Mario and his men riding down upon her. "No," she thought, "he would have had to fight the Englishman and his soldiers first, and fighting takes time."

The lights in the castle windows still flitted hither and thither. She scrambled down toward the woods, and whistled softly, till another whistle answered her, then went back hurriedly to her post above the road. How fast they rode, these men who came nearer and nearer! Now she could distinguish a dark cloaked figure riding at their head.

Just below her hiding-place Captain Charnley reined in his horse and whistled. An answering whistle came low and distinct from the rocks above his head. He rode on a few paces, and where the road dipped and the woods grew close about it, halted his men and waited.

Three figures slipped from the black shadow of the trees, and Charnley beckoned three troopers, each of whom was leading a spare horse, one the very same that the little Princess had ridden from Casaluccio to San Cataldo on a wild spring evening long ago. As he lifted his wife into her saddle, Decilis broke the silence with half-eager, half-careless questioning.

“Well, Signore Charnley, has all gone well?”

Never once did I remember that we must have horses. How did you get hold of them?"

"We took them," said Charnley. "We must hurry, for I am convinced they will be after us presently."

The little troop rode on, three figures now heading it. Charnley spoke again in quick, curt sentences.

"It might have been better — or worse. Thanks to the woman Vierci, Don Mario was found and delivered. The guard was drunk and would not let him out. By the time she rescued him he was in a faint from loss of blood, but recovered quite soon enough, and his wound is not serious. He wanted to shoot the guard. I would not let him, but he has doubtless done it by now. I myself went back to the Princess's apartments and discovered her flight. I set Mario's men to search the house. I gave out that I and mine would search the woods, and hustled them off as promptly as I could."

The Prince turned in his saddle and looked back.

"The lights are out," he said, with a laugh.

"That means that they are reconsidering matters."

Valeria was wondering if ever she would be able to thank Charnley. How can you thank a man, she asked herself, who has given you back to hope and youth — to life in short, and perhaps something better than life? And a man who wants neither your friendship nor your gratitude?

His voice giving an order, startled her. The troop halted.

"What is it?" she asked.

The rising wind sighed past them, chasing ragged clouds that promised the first heavy rains of autumn. It brought with it a dull throbbing sound. In the darkness Felice leant closer to Valeria, and laid his right hand on hers. It was strange how the touch brought her calm, more than that, a moment's complete forgetfulness of what went on round her. After the passing of that moment he left her, riding to the rear, where Charnley was already.

"What are you doing?" said Charnley, curtly. "I asked you to go on with the Princess while I and these fellows brought up the rear."

But already the troopers on ahead had closed up round the two women and obeyed their captain's orders.

"My friend," said Decilis, "lend me one of your pistols, and bear in mind the debt I owe Mario Vierci."

Charnley could not do otherwise than admit the argument, and comply with the request. After which he and Decilis rode on side by side.

The pursuit, if pursuit it was, kept its distance as yet. The pursued were now beyond the chestnut woods, and the road lay between vineyards, where rank on rank of low, vine-hung trees seemed to stretch as monotonously as a quiet sea. Further on, however, the road trended to the left and rose somewhat, skirting a sloping hillside.

That was the spot which Charnley hoped to gain before the *guerillas* attacked him. That their fresh horses would give them the chance to attack if they had a mind to, he could not doubt. The women and their escort should ride on, while he and his men would halt on the higher ground. The attacking force would be small, thanks to the long start

he had had, and to the fact that half of Don Mario's horses had joined him tired by a long night's ride, and reached San Cataldo worn out.

What he expected duly came to pass. He and his men and Don Felice Decilis, waiting on the rising ground, saw a small dark group of horsemen riding at a gallop between the vineyards, headed by a single figure not cloaked like the others, which seemed to gesticulate wildly.

Now they could see the dim glitter of his silver trappings, and hear his piercing voice calling on his followers.

"Mario," said Decilis, "and I think that he is mad."

As his lips formed the last words a shot whistled past him. Without waiting for his men, Don Mario had raised his carbine and fired. He was in very truth beside himself with pain and rage and hate. Some of his men halted and followed his example, some rode on to join him, and upon them sudden and swift came Charnley and his Neapolitans charging down the slope. Before the rush of that compact force, before the relentless slash-

ing of the cavalry sabres, one *guerilla* after another turned and fled.

Very soon the little skirmish was over and Charnley ordered back his men.

Don Mario Vierci who had fired off his pistols, wounding one soldier, and had then been ridden down and unhorsed, got on to his feet to find that the charge had passed him, and that one solitary dismounted foe was waiting for him. With a hoarse short cry he sprang forward knife in hand, and as he did so a pistol bullet grazed his cheek. An instant later he grappled with Prince Decilis, throwing one long arm round him. There was a fierce brief struggle, then Decilis shook himself free from a dead man's loosening clutch; with the knife which Valeria had given him he had stabbed Don Mario to the heart.

The sound of the single shot and the scattered volley had reached Valeria. After many vain entreaties on her part, the men with her at last consented to draw rein.

Valeria was certain that never would she hear Felice's voice again or see him smile at

her, that for her the gates of the earthly paradise had indeed opened a little way, only to be shut against her everlastingly. He too had known it would be so, she told herself, and had bidden her a silent farewell. She had the strange calm that comes to us with the knowledge that the blow has fallen.

“And never again nerve shall quiver or pulse shall beat.”

Felice was dead, she thought, and dead without knowing how she loved him. He had said, “Is it forgiveness?” and she could not speak and say that it was the love that had been his always, a love that had suffered and suffered and suffered, but had never died. This still despair, born of utter physical weariness, held her under its spell till she became aware of voices and movement all round her. Charnley was speaking to her — in English — and the words held no meaning for her. She turned faint, swayed in the saddle, and would have fallen, had not Prince Decilis steadied her with one arm.

Someone handed him a spirit flask and he made her drink from it. Presently they all

rode on again through a night that, save for the hurrying wind, had grown quite silent.

They halted again where a bridle-track turned off from the highroad to Casaluccio. This path Charnley and his soldiers would follow, and so by a *détour* go back into the mountains. Before the little Princess and her husband lay Casaluccio and safety. They had no longer any need of him.

The Prince had moved aside and was speaking to the troopers. Charnley found himself alone beside Valeria. He wished that he could have seen her face clearly once again. He took her hand in his. With a sudden strength she drew his hand to her lips and kissed it.

The scuffling of horses' hoofs, as the riders wheeled at the word of command, then a steady trample as they rode away. Three figures speeding swiftly along a lonely highway, pursued only by a sweeping gust and the patter of heavy raindrops:

"And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm."

Thus after long wandering, by rough and dreary ways, did Valeria reach the earthly

paradise. She had known the bitterness of love disdained. "The cruel wrong, the scornful ways, the painful patience in delays." She knew at last the opening of the gates, the entering into her kingdom.

God keep you, dear little Princess, and grant that you dwell now in a securer paradise, even the paradise of the Blessed Dead. Amen.



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2. The second point is that the government has a duty to ensure that the financial system is fair and transparent. This means that the government must ensure that all participants in the financial system are treated equally and that there is no undue influence or manipulation. The government must also ensure that the financial system is transparent and that all transactions are properly recorded and reported.

3. The third point is that the government has a duty to ensure that the financial system is efficient and effective. This means that the government must ensure that the financial system is able to allocate resources efficiently and that it is able to provide the services that are needed by the public. The government must also ensure that the financial system is able to adapt to changing circumstances and that it is able to provide the services that are needed by the public in a timely and effective manner.

4. The fourth point is that the government has a duty to ensure that the financial system is resilient and able to withstand shocks. This means that the government must ensure that the financial system is able to absorb shocks and that it is able to recover from shocks in a timely and effective manner. The government must also ensure that the financial system is able to provide the services that are needed by the public in a timely and effective manner.

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